

Maine's Roads, Bridges Need Massive Investment

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Roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost Maine motorists a total of \$1.3 billion statewide annually – as much as \$1,561 per driver in some urban areas – due to higher vehicle operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays. Increased investment in transportation improvements at the local, state and federal levels could relieve traffic congestion, improve road, bridge and transit conditions, boost safety, and support long-term economic growth in Maine, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

The TRIP report, “Maine Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State’s Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility,” finds that throughout Maine, 44% of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 13% of locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and 783 people lost their lives on the state’s roads from 2015-2019. Maine’s major urban roads are becoming increasingly congested, causing significant delays and choking commuting and commerce.

Driving on deficient roads in Maine costs the state’s drivers a total of \$1.3 billion per year in the form of extra vehicle operating costs (VOC) as a result of driving on roads in need of repair, lost time and fuel due to congestion-related delays, and the costs of traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway features likely were a contributing factor. The report includes regional pavement and bridge conditions, a list of the most congested corridors, highway safety data, and cost breakdowns for the Bangor, Lewiston-Auburn and Portland urban areas and statewide.

The TRIP report finds that 23% of major locally and state-maintained roads in Maine are in poor condition and another 21% are in mediocre condition, costing the state’s drivers an additional \$563 million each year in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear. The remaining 14% of Maine’s major roads are in fair condition and 42% are in mediocre condition.

“Transportation is fundamental to our safety, economic prosperity, and quality of life,” said Maine Department of Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note. “The challenges we face due to our chronic funding shortfall have been made worse by the recent

drops in travel due to COVID-19 and the resulting reductions in Highway Fund and other transportation-related revenues. Once we have defeated the virus and dealt with the resulting economic fallout, we must work to resolve our structural transportation revenue problems so that we can not only maintain our transportation system, but also improve it with targeted capacity improvements, improvements to villages and downtowns, and measures to address climate change. Investing in transportation is key to moving Maine forward.”

Thirteen percent of Maine’s bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the sixth highest rate in the nation. Bridges that are rated poor/structurally deficient have significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Fifty-five percent of the state’s bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 32% are in good condition.

Traffic congestion in the state is worsening, causing as much 28 annual hours of delay for the average motorist and costing up to \$568 annually per driver in lost time and wasted fuel. Statewide, drivers lose \$250 million annually as a result of lost time and wasted fuel due to traffic congestion. The TRIP report identifies and ranks the 20 most congested corridors in Maine based on an analysis of delays during typical morning and evening peak travel periods.

“Transportation is so critical to the city, region and state. The impacts of slim budgets, climate change and now the pandemic have greatly impacted our ability to keep up with infrastructure development and maintenance,” said Bangor City Manager Cathy Conlow. “Our economic future is dependent on long-term reliable funding for infrastructure.

From 2015 to 2019, 783 people were killed in traffic crashes in Maine, an average of 157 fatalities each year. In 2019, Maine had 1.06 traffic fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled, lower than the national average of 1.11. In 2018, the fatality rate on Maine’s non-interstate rural roads was more than three-and-a-half times higher than on all other roads in the state (1.39 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.37). Traffic crashes imposed a total of \$1.5 billion in economic costs in Maine in 2019 and traffic crashes in which a lack of adequate roadway safety features were likely a contributing factor imposed \$497 million in economic costs.

“The pandemic has cast a spotlight on trucking’s importance to our state, as our members have delivered the essential goods

and services needed for Mainers to lead their daily lives and for businesses to bring their goods and services to market,” said Timothy Doyle, vice president of the Maine Motor Transport Association. “Having a safe, reliable, and efficient transportation system is vital to our members and to the economy of Maine.”

The efficiency and condition of Maine’s transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state’s economy. Annually, \$80.5 billion in goods are shipped to and from Maine, relying heavily on the state’s network of roads and bridges. Increasingly, companies are looking at the quality of a region’s transportation system when deciding where to re-locate or expand. Regions with congested or poorly maintained roads may see businesses relocate to areas with a smoother, more efficient and more modern transportation system. Approximately 283,000 full-time jobs in Maine in key industries like tourism, retail sales, agriculture and manufacturing are dependent on the quality, safety and reliability of the state’s transportation infrastructure network.

The Maine State Legislature’s Blue Ribbon Commission to Study and Recommend Funding Solutions for the State’s Transportation System found the state faces an annual transportation funding shortfall of approximately \$232 million. Assuming the federal government continues to provide approximately one-third of Maine’s transportation funding need, the state will need to address a funding gap of approximately \$160 million. If the annual transportation funding need is met, the commission recommended that Maine’s existing reliance on bonding to supplement transportation funding should be reduced in a fiscally responsible manner.

“These conditions are only going to get worse, increasing the additional costs to motorists, if greater investment is not made available at the federal, state and local levels of government,” said Dave Kearby, TRIP’s executive director. “Without adequate funding, Maine’s transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life.”