

TRIP: North Carolina Roads, Bridges Need Investment

Roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost North Carolina motorists a total of \$10.3 billion statewide annually – as much as \$1,976 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 North Carolina, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

The TRIP report, “North Carolina Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State’s Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility,” finds that throughout North Carolina, one-third of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 9% of locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and 7,051 people lost their lives on the state’s roads from 2015-2019. North Carolina’s major urban roads are becoming increasingly congested, causing significant delays and choking commuting and commerce.

Driving on deficient North Carolina roads costs the state’s drivers \$10.3 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 Asheville, Charlotte Metro, Raleigh-Durham, Triad and Wilmington urban areas and statewide.

The TRIP report finds that 14% of major locally and state-maintained roads in North Carolina are in poor condition and another 23% are in mediocre condition, costing the state’s motorists an additional \$3.8 billion each year in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear. Twenty-four percent of North Carolina’s major roads are in fair

condition and the remaining 40% are in good condition.

Nine percent of North Carolina’s bridges are rated poor/structurally deficient, with significant deterioration to the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Fifty-two percent are rated in fair condition and the remaining 39% are in good condition.

“North Carolina Transportation by the Numbers shows exactly how high the costs of inadequate highway infrastructure have become for the average North Carolinian and for the residents of our major metro areas,” said Gary Salamido, president and CEO of the N.C. Chamber. “The evidence in this report leads to a clear conclusion: Our leaders have an opportunity to enact bold transportation legislation in 2021, or the costs will continue to pile up for North Carolina. The NC Chamber and our Destination 2030 coalition stand ready to support our legislative partners in identifying and activating solutions.”

Traffic congestion throughout the state is worsening, causing as much as 48 annual hours of delay for the average motorist and costing up to \$1,050 per driver annually in lost time and wasted fuel. Statewide, drivers lose \$3.3 billion annually as a result of lost time and wasted fuel due to traffic congestion.

Traffic crashes in North Carolina claimed the lives 7,051 people from 2015 to 2019. North Carolina’s overall traffic fatality rate of 1.12 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2019 is slightly higher than the national average of 1.11. The financial impact of traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway safety features were likely a contributing factor was \$3.2 billion statewide.

The efficiency and condition of North Carolina’s transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state’s economy. Annually, \$672 billion in goods are shipped to and from North Carolina, 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 1.9 million full-

time jobs in North Carolina 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.

A lack of sufficient funding at the local, state and federal levels will make it difficult to adequately maintain and improve the state’s existing transportation system. The reduction in vehicle travel during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on transportation revenue. According to the North Carolina Department of Transportation, highway revenue for Fiscal Year 2020, which ended June 30, is down \$188 million.

According to a N.C. Chamber Foundation report, the state’s existing transportation revenues are inadequate to maintain, let alone improve, the deteriorating system. The report concludes that the state’s existing motor fuels tax does not provide sufficient revenue, largely as a result of changes in driver behavior and increasing vehicle fuel efficiency. It recommends the implementation of a road user charge program, phasing out the motor fuels tax, adjusting the highway use tax to a competitive rate, and dedicating a fraction of the statewide sales tax to transportation investment.

A recent report by the N.C. FIRST Commission found that North Carolina’s highway, aviation, rail, ferry, transit, bike and pedestrian facilities are a “deteriorating and underperforming system.” The report concluded that providing North Carolina with a transportation network that will ensure the state’s economic vitality, competitiveness and safety would require that North Carolina increase its current \$5 billion annual transportation investment by a minimum of \$2 billion annually – \$20 billion over the next decade.

“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, North Carolina’s transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life.”