

## TRIP: West Virginia Roads, Bridges Need Investment

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Roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost West Virginia motorists a total of \$1.6 billion statewide annually – as much as \$1,421 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 West Virginia, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

The TRIP report, “West Virginia Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State’s Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility,” finds that throughout West Virginia, more than half of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 21% of locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and nearly 1,400 people lost their lives on the state’s roads from 2015-2019. West Virginia’s major urban roads are congested, causing significant delays and choking commuting and commerce.

Driving on deficient West Virginia roads costs state’s drivers a total of \$1.6 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 Beckley, Charleston, Huntington, Morgantown, Parkersburg, Weirton-Steubenville and Wheeling urban areas and statewide.

The TRIP report finds that 31% of West Virginia’s major roads are in poor condition and 24% are in mediocre condition. Driving on deteriorated roads costs the state’s motorists an additional \$825 million each year in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs,

and increased fuel consumption and tire wear. Eighteen percent of West Virginia’s major roads are in fair condition and the remaining 27% are in good condition.

Statewide, 21% of West Virginia’s bridges are rated poor/structurally deficient – the second highest rate in the nation. Bridges that are in poor/structurally deficient condition have significant deterioration to the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Fifty-three percent of the state’s bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 26% are rated good.

“Improving infrastructure in West Virginia gives our people a renewed hope,” said Byrd White, secretary of the West Virginia Department of Transportation and commissioner of the West Virginia Department of Highways. “We have a unique opportunity to build West Virginia up, and it’s a critical point in the history of this state – a turning point. Everyone who works in state government right now is giving their all and working together as one team, that’s team West Virginia. The TRIP report is a tool that’s going to help us reach where we need, to give our citizens the chance to build a future they deserve.”

Traffic crashes in West Virginia claimed the lives of 1,394 people from 2015 to 2019. West Virginia’s overall traffic fatality rate of 1.36 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2019 is higher than the national average of 1.11 and the 13th highest in the United States

In the Charleston urban area, on average, 26 people were killed in traffic crashes each year from 2015 to 2019. The financial impact of West Virginia traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway safety features were likely a contributing factor was \$478 million annually per year.

In 2019, the state’s transportation system carried 19.1 billion annual vehicle miles of travel (VMT). Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, vehicle travel in West Virginia dropped by as much as 40% in April 2020 (as compared to vehicle travel during the same month the previous year), but rebounded to 11% below the previous year’s volume in November 2020. Congested roads choke commuting and commerce and cost West Virginia drivers \$300 million each year in the form of lost time and wasted fuel.

“West Virginia’s extensive infrastructure system provides the state’s residents, visitors and businesses with a high level of mobility and a better quality of life,” said Mike Clowser, chairman of the West Virginia Business and Industry Council. “Good roads and bridges provide West Virginia with the opportunity to compete with other states in attracting jobs and economic development. Investing in roads and bridges is key to West Virginia’s economic future.”

The efficiency and condition of West Virginia’s transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state’s economy. Annually, \$125 billion in goods are shipped to and from West Virginia, 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 relocate 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.

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. In 2015 a report by the West Virginia Blue Ribbon Commission on Highways found that West Virginia needed to increase its annual investment in its highway and bridge system by \$750 million annually for needed repairs and an additional \$380 million annually for needed expansion to the system – a total of approximately \$1.1 billion annually. In 2017 the West Virginia legislature approved increases in the state’s motor fuel, registration fees, and taxes on new car purchases to support additional highway investment. State voters subsequently approved a referendum 73% to 27% allowing the state to borrow up to \$1.6 billion to fund Gov. Jim Justice’s Roads to Prosperity Initiative.

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