

# The Intelligencer. Wheeling News-Register

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 22, 2021

## Study: Poor Road Conditions Cost Wheeling-Area Drivers \$1,421 Annually

TOP HEADLINES

DEREK REDD, Managing Editor



Photo by Scott McCloskey Crews with the Ohio-West Virginia Excavating Company make slip repairs and construct a new retaining wall on Peters Run Road in 2019. Poor road conditions cost drivers in the Wheeling area \$1,421 annually, according to TRIP.

**WHEELING** — Poor road conditions already raise the blood pressure of Wheeling motorists. If the dollar figure one national organization puts to those conditions are correct, their blood pressure could spike even higher.

TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, says that by its calculations, substandard road conditions cost Wheeling drivers \$1,421 in a year. That's the highest total — factoring in vehicle operation costs, traffic congestion and safety issues — among the state's seven largest urban areas.

Rocky Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research, said that a boost in transportation funding in West Virginia in 2017 has helped matters in the state, but there still is plenty of work to do.

"The bottom line is the state still faces significant challenges," Moretti said, "and addressing that is going to take even additional and further boosts to transportation funding in West Virginia.

"We've seen with the pandemic just how important the state's transportation system is to support its supply chain."

TRIP looked at seven urban areas in West Virginia — Wheeling, Charleston, Huntington, Beckley, Morgantown, Parkersburg and Weirton-Steubenville. It combined the costs between vehicle operation costs, the lost time and fuel from traffic congestion and the economic impact of serious and fatal crashes in the area.

According to TRIP's research, 55 percent of West Virginia's major roads and highways are rated in mediocre or poor condition. In Wheeling, that total is 39 percent, 20 percent poor and 19 percent mediocre. Also, 93 of the Wheeling area's 517 bridges, or 18 percent, are rated poor or structurally deficient.

The biggest share of Wheeling's price tag comes from congestion costs, which were by far the most of the seven urban areas. Wheeling's costs topped out at \$572 per driver. The next closest was Huntington at \$383 per driver.

As far as crash costs, Wheeling averaged 16 traffic fatalities between 2015-19 and cost each driver \$340. Vehicle operating costs came to \$509 per driver.

The overall price tag for West Virginia drivers was huge — \$1.6 billion each year, according to TRIP.

The state transportation department understands the issues in front of it, and West Virginia Secretary of Transportation Byrd White III said much of the state's current problem stems from it having to play catch-up on many of the road issues around West Virginia.

"We have started from a position where we're in the hole," White said during a TRIP video conference. "We're behind. We're trying to chase and catch up to the problems that have been here for decades."

White said the state is using a multi-pronged approach to find solutions. It is using the bond program to start new road construction to alleviate congestion, along with a patching program to keep existing roadways in as good a condition as possible.

White also said the state is working on preventative measures like improving ditches and taking care of road shoulders to keep water off the roads and cutting back tree canopies to keep roads dry.

"It's the basic stuff I call blocking and tackling," he said.

Help could be coming from the federal level as well. U.S. Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, R-W.Va., said in pre-recorded comments that she now is the top Republican on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. She's hopeful that another bipartisan roads bill can be hammered out this year among committee members.

Among her state priorities are continued work on Corridor H, which when finished would move traffic from Elkins past Parsons, Davis and Moorefield and into Virginia. She also wants to make sure improving the state's bridges remains a priority.

"Like many rural states, West Virginia struggles with structurally deficient bridges," she said. "I don't need to tell you all that. Bridges have traditionally been neglected for flashier highway projects, so I want to insure adequate funding for our bridges."