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Drivers paying hefty costs for congestion, poor quality of Denver-area roads, report says

Rush hour traffic backs up in Wheat Ridge. The General Assembly made no progress toward a sustainable transportation-funding source in 2019. **KATHLEEN LAVINE, DENVER BUSINESS JOURNAL**

By Ed Sealover – Senior Reporter, Denver Business Journal

Denver-area drivers spend nearly $2,000 more per year because of fuel wasted in congestion and road repairs linked to poor conditions, according to a report released Tuesday by a national transportation research organization.

Business and contracting groups, who participated in a Zoom call announcing the release of the TRIP report, pointed to it as further evidence that Colorado Legislature must pass a comprehensive transportation-funding bill this year before road conditions deteriorate further. Colorado Senate Majority Leader Steve Fenberg, D-Boulder, said during a separate weekly media briefing given by Democratic Senate leaders that he expects that bill will be introduced in the next week, though details on the fees it will seek to raise are still being negotiated.

The $1,974 annual cost of traffic delays on Denver-area drivers calculated by Washington, D.C.-based TRIP includes two elements. The average motorist was stuck in traffic for 62 more hours than they should have been because of congestion, costing them 26 gallons of fuel and $1,242, the organization said. And Denver-area roads – 37% of which it graded as poor and 26% of which it assessed as mediocre – added another $732 in repair costs to the average vehicle.

The numbers were based on 2019 data because it's believed to be more of an indicator of future traffic patterns than last year, TRIP director of policy and research Rocky Moretti explained. Vehicle miles traveled dropped 42% year over year during the stay-at-home order early in the pandemic but were back at 90% of 2019 levels by November, he said.

While TRIP did not offer a direct comparison of Denver-area costs to other major metropolitan areas in the U.S., it noted that Denver roads were slightly worse than national urban roads, of which 32% were in poor condition and 24% in mediocre condition in 2019. The combined costs also were up 2.3% from their $1,929 level that TRIP calculated in 2018.

Also, the 34% increase in vehicle traffic that Colorado has seen since 2000 ranks the state seventh nationally, Moretti said.

Mike Kopp, president/CEO of Colorado Concern and head of business-comprised transportation group A Way Forward, noted that TRIP also estimated that $305 billion in goods travel on the state's highways every year – a number expected to increase 82% in the next quarter-century. If congestion is not eased and maintenance of state roads not improved by some boost in funding, the state's productivity and attractiveness as a place for business will slip, he said.

"Once again, what we see in the TRIP report is a perspective on the great cost to the status quo," Kopp said.

TRIP also calculated the most congested stretches of highway in the state and found that the top five and eight of the top 10 are in the Denver area. The stretch of Colorado Hwy. 470 in Littleton and Lone Tree between Santa Fe Drive and Yosemite Street ranked as the worst, with 104,959 vehicles moving over its 10.8 miles every day. But ranking just behind it were: Interstate 25 through Denver between Hampden Avenue and Speer Boulevard; Parker Road through Aurora for the 2.5 miles south of Hampden Avenue; Arapahoe Road through Greenwood Village and Aurora from I-25 to Parker Road; and I-25 through Lone Tree and Denver between Lincoln Avenue and Hampden Avenue.

Moretti said that with the levels of population and economic growth that Colorado is seeing, he expects the congestion and road-repair costs to continue to rise unless investments are made in the transportation system. He did not specify the percentage of those investments that should go to highway repair versus multimodal transportation – a debate that is front and center in the Legislature – but said he believes that employment opportunities will continue to gravitate to areas nationally that put money toward infrastructure.