

TRIP report: Poor road conditions cost New Mexico drivers \$2.7 billion annually

[Algernon D'Amassa](#) | Las Cruces Sun-News
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LAS CRUCES - More than half of New Mexico's major roads and highways are in fair-to-poor condition, according to a new report released Thursday by the DC-based transportation research nonprofit TRIP.

In major metro areas, 34 percent of roadways in the Santa Fe area are in poor condition, compared to 32 percent in the Las Cruces area and 40 percent in the Albuquerque area.

Traffic congestion, deteriorated roadways and gaps in safety features cost the state's drivers an estimated \$2.7 billion annually, according to TRIP. The 19-page report itemizes \$2.79 billion in state transportation projects — from resurfacing and road reconstruction to widening, drainage improvements and bridge replacements or widening — that remain unfunded.



Rough roads filled with potholes and covered in cracks is shown on Alameda Avenue in Las Cruces on Thursday, March 4, 2021. *Nathan J Fish/Sun-News*

In the Las Cruces area, drivers were estimated to be spending an average of \$1,695 in extra vehicle costs annually because of hazardous roads, lost time due to traffic congestion and accidents attributable to a lack of safety features.

"We need to take our transportation issues very seriously, because right now our roads are a disaster," said state Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, who reacted to the report Thursday. According to the report, New Mexico's population grew by 15 percent between 2000 and 2020, while vehicle miles of travel on the state's transportation system has increased at an even faster rate, with 27.8 billion miles of travel in 2019 alone.

While vehicle traffic dropped off up to 41 percent over the previous year during the COVID-19 pandemic, by November it had rebounded to just 10 percent below November 2019 in a trend anticipated to continue as public health restrictions continue to ease.

Rocky Moretti, TRIP's policy and research director, added that freight truck traffic is in fact higher nationwide now than before the onset of the pandemic and that the maintenance and improvement of New Mexico's transportation system was critical to economic development. The report estimates \$123 billion in goods shipped to and from New Mexico on state roads and bridges annually, and that 349,000 full-time jobs in tourism, retail, agriculture and manufacturing among other industries depend on that network.



It also had health and safety implications for New Mexicans. With an overall traffic fatality rate of 1.53 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2019, New Mexico ranked third nationwide with an average significantly higher than the national rate of 1.11. According to the report, between 2015 and 2019 traffic fatalities in New Mexico averaged 379 annually.

Padilla and two state House lawmakers from southern New Mexico joined Moretti for a video news conference to discuss the report's implications.

Padilla said road investments were key to luring Amazon to develop facilities in the Albuquerque area, and state Rep. Rebecca Dow, R-Truth or Consequences, said a paved road completed in 2018 [leading to Spaceport America](#) from the Las Cruces area had been essential in promoting high-paying tech jobs at the facility, located remotely in Sierra County.

"All lawmakers understand the critical importance of rural road infrastructure and highways," she said.



A truck is seen driving a newly paved southern road to Spaceport America on Thursday July 12, 2018. *Josh Bachman/Sun-News* State Rep. Willie Madrid, D-Chaparral, remarked that there was bipartisan consensus in Santa Fe, in principle, on the importance of maintaining roads and bridges, but said the report's findings drove the point home and that he hoped it would have "a cold, sobering effect of understanding our responsibilities."

"We as a state ... have to be more collaborative about this effort. I implore our governor to step up and add a lot more funds to this," he continued. Yet securing those funds, and making sure they get to roads and bridges and create construction jobs, is the challenge, the lawmakers acknowledged.

"We have some of the lowest gas taxes in the region since the 1980s," Padilla said, suggesting one revenue stream. He also said planning needed to get underway for a coming transition toward more electric-powered vehicles.

Dow said public support for taxes depended on seeing a return in the form of service, including road improvements, and said her fellow

Republicans in the Legislature would be more amenable to comprehensive tax policy as opposed to piecemeal tax increases.

In Washington, [President Joe Biden hosted Democratic and Republican members of Congress Thursday](#) to discuss an ambitious infrastructure package that could be the administration's next major push after passage of a \$1.9 trillion stimulus bill, to invest in major transit improvements throughout the U.S.



Dow said New Mexico should plan on leveraging any federal infrastructure dollars with matching funds, and look for partnerships with the private sector to spare some public funds.

While equitable distribution of funded capital projects is a perennial challenge, Padilla expressed confidence in the standards in effect at the New Mexico Department of Transportation, and Dow said that more lawmakers were putting their discretionary capital funds toward infrastructures and "every district is getting a major road done."

"The people are depending on this and they're depending on our ability to find a meeting of the minds," Madrid said.

TRIP's report can be read for free on the nonprofit's website, <http://www.TRIPnet.org>.

Or read it right here:

[TRIP New Mexico Transportation by the Numbers Report March 2021](#) by [Algernon D'Amassa](#) on Scribd

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