

## Report: New Mexico roads 'a complete disaster'

### Lawmakers eye gas tax hikes as means to increase funds for maintenance, repairs

By Daniel J. Chacon

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New Mexico's roadways are in terrible shape and they're costing the average driver \$767 annually in additional vehicle operating costs, according to a new report.

But motorists don't need to read a narrative to understand the condition of interstates, highways and roads.

"All you have to do is hop in your vehicle and drive a couple of miles," Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, said Thursday during a virtual news conference.

"Our roads at the moment are a complete disaster and we do need to take it seriously," added Padilla, vice chairman of the Senate Tax, Business and Transportation Committee. The report by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C., found 56 percent of major roads and highways in New Mexico are in poor or mediocre condition due to inadequate state and local funding.

In the Santa Fe area, 34 percent of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor condition and another 18 percent are in mediocre condition, according to the report.

"The health and future growth of New Mexico's economy is riding on its transportation system," the report states. "Each year, \$123 billion in goods are shipped to and from sites in New Mexico, mostly by trucks. Increases in passenger and freight movement will place further burdens on the state's already deteriorated and congested network of roads and bridges."

The sobering findings come as lawmakers consider a bill that would increase the gasoline excise tax from 17 cents to 22 cents per gallon. "We have some of the lowest gas taxes in the region and they've been that way since the 1980s," Padilla said. "As a result, we're taking a serious look at what we do with gas tax because that is where this large chunk of money can come from."

Senate Bill 168, which would increase the gas tax 1 cent a year over five years, would generate an additional \$9.1 million in fiscal year 2022 and increase to \$36.6 million by fiscal year 2025.

The last time New Mexico raised the gas tax was in 1993, when it was increased from 16 cents to 22 cents per gallon. The tax has been reduced twice since then to the current rate of 17 cents per gallon.

The measure lawmakers are considering this year also would increase the special fuel excise tax by 5 cents per gallon over five years, from 21 cents to 26 cents.

"The bill does not change the percentage distributions of either tax, therefore all gasoline and special fuel tax recipients will benefit from the increase," according to a fiscal impact report on the measure. "The primary beneficiaries are state and local road funds."

Rep. Rebecca Dow, R-Truth or Consequences, said people would be willing to pay higher tax on their gas only if they were certain the money would go directly to improving and repairing roads.

"Assuring that that's where those dollars go will be key in passing a gas tax if that is what happens," said Dow, a member of the House Commerce and Economic Development Committee. Dow said the state also has an opportunity to leverage federal dollars with a state match.

"We're hearing that there [are] COVID relief and economic recovery dollars that are coming to the state in the tune of close to a billion dollars," she said. "Jobs are created when we repair roads and through the construction process and through the commerce that's allowed to occur. So, if we can dedicate some of those dollars and we can leverage those with private partnerships, we don't have to pass all the burden off to the taxpayers and the folks who call New Mexico home."

Asked about the likelihood of a gas tax increase passing during this year's legislative session, Padilla said it's "very good." "I think that the different composition of the Legislature at this point is going to lend itself to getting that through," he said, adding the poor condition of roads may help propel the measure forward.

Before the coronavirus pandemic, New Mexico had some of the fastest-growing usage in the country, with an increase of 22 percent in travel on roads and highways, said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for the nonprofit that wrote the report.

While travel fell 41 percent across the state in April, "ultimately, we'll see vehicle travel returning to previous levels," he said.

At the same time, travel is expected to continue to grow and Moretti said the state Department of Transportation reports it has \$2.8 billion in critically needed transportation projects.

"These are projects to improve safety on the state's transportation system, to relieve traffic congestion or expand mobility to help support economic development opportunities or to improve road and bridge conditions across the state," he said. "But currently, they don't have adequate funding for these needed projects to move forward."

Investing in the deteriorating transportation system will require more money that ultimately will come from the public, he said. Drivers, Moretti added, are already paying a steep price.

"Motorists in the state annually are paying \$2.7 billion in the cost of driving on roads that are deteriorated, that are beating up their vehicles due

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### SANTA FE PUBLIC SCHOOLS

## Under deal, inoculated teachers to return

Only educators with accommodation to work from home exempt, SFPS superintendent says

By James Baran  
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The district did not require all teachers and staff members to return, instead arranging with union leaders to seek "volunteers" to help with hybrid learning.

The district had enough volunteers to bring 17.5% of its 12,000 students back to school, with another 1,900 on a waiting list.

Teachers and staff members returned to school Monday.

Grades rates rise, with big gains at SFHS, Capital

Santa Fe Public Schools' graduation rate climbed to 84.2 percent for the 2020-21 school year, up from 79.1 percent the year before, Superintendent Vanessa Garcia announced during Thursday's school board meeting.

LOCAL 88000 8

## Vacancies at SFPD highest in 5 years, chief says

By Victoria Taylor  
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The Santa Fe Police Department, which has been struggling to reduce its rate of open positions in the early months of the coronavirus pandemic, now has its highest number of vacancies in five years, Chief Andrew Padilla told city councilors this week.

The department has 15 vacant police officer positions and 19 open positions for civilian staff, Padilla said. The number of vacancies has increased by an average of 28 officers per year since 2016, with the agency having to use a hire freeze to reduce the number of vacancies.

The city faces long backlogs to recruit officers, largely because of higher pay offers by other law enforcement agencies in the area — in part because of the Albuquerque Police Department's 10 percent raise in the 2019-2020 fiscal year.

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DRIVING KILLING

## Change of venue for trial rejected

Judge says defense offered inadequate evidence jurors in Santa Fe will be biased

By Phoenix Newswire  
[www.phoenixnewswire.com](http://www.phoenixnewswire.com)

State District Judge T. Glenn Hilligan has denied a request to move Francisco Montoya's murder trial to Los Alamos, where the town's defense attorney had argued he was more likely to get a fair trial on charges that he shot and shooting a 19-year-old White in front of a crowd in a public square.

Montoya is charged with the murder of 19-year-old White in front of a crowd in a public square. The defense attorney had argued he was more likely to get a fair trial on charges that he shot and shooting a 19-year-old White in front of a crowd in a public square.

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LEGISLATURE THE 2021 SESSION

INSIDE

A fiscal system measure likely advances a legislative proposal. **PGA 8**

are proposed to fund from the state's general fund, mostly by bonds. Increases in passenger and freight movement will place further burdens on the state's already deteriorated and congested network of roads and bridges.

The report found 1,894 people were killed in traffic crashes in New Mexico from 2015-19.

"The rate of traffic fatalities compared against the amount of travel in New Mexico is the third-highest rate in the country, so clearly a significant challenge in improving traffic safety," Moretti said.

"We know that when you make roadway safety improvements, they can result in significant improvements in safety."

The report found, on average, 150 people die annually in the Albuquerque area in traffic crashes. In the Santa Fe area, the average is 29 fatalities annually.

"We can have a significant positive impact on safety," Moretti said, "with the resources in place to make those improvements."

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