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This is how much gas -- and money -- you waste sitting in Louisiana traffic, study says

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Cars stop on LA-73 as traffic from LA-621 head toward the interstate. Morning traffic backups in the I-10/73/621 area just east of the I-10 interchange in Ascension Parish Friday September 18, 2020, in Prairieville, La. A lawsuit has been filed over growth and the fight turns on how much I-10 upgrades will help congested area. STAFF PHOTO BY BILL FEIG



Will Sentell

Two reports Thursday panned how Louisiana supports its roads and bridges and how a standard transportation system is costing motorists \$7.6 billion per year.

State investments in roads and bridges nationally averages 73% of the cost, but is only

49% in Louisiana, according to a study by the Blanco Public Policy Center at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

It said transportation here accounts for 4% of total state spending, the second lowest in the nation and well behind Florida at 11.8%, Texas at 10.8% and Mississippi at 6%.

Meanwhile, poor driving conditions are costing Louisiana motorists \$7.6 billion per year, according to a separate study financed by insurance firms, labor unions and others.

The review also showed that drivers in Baton Rouge and New Orleans lose 60 hours per year while stuck in traffic, and waste more than \$1,200 annually because of backups. It said motorists in Baton Rouge and New Orleans squander 26 gallons of gasoline per year and those in Lafayette 17 gallons. That study was done by TRIP, a nonprofit research group that focuses on transportation issues.

Motorists in Louisiana pay 38 cents per gallon, including 20 cents in state charges.

The Blanco report noted that the 16-cent base tax was approved in 1984, and said it has lost 61.5% of its purchasing power because of inflation.

Another four cents was approved by voters in 1989 and took effect in 1990 to fund 16 projects that were supposed to be finished by 2005. Two of the 16 have not been completed.

All but two states have boosted gas taxes since Louisiana did, according to the review, and 36 have done so since 2010.

The estimated costs of bad roads to drivers in the TRIP report is more than half of the \$14 billion backlog of road and bridge needs that are left undone because of a funding shortage, including resurfacing, bridge repairs and safety measures.

Another \$15 billion or so of the state's "wish list" includes a new bridge across the Mississippi River in Baton Rouge and the completion of Interstate 49 between New Orleans and Lafayette.

The TRIP review said 26% of roads in Baton Rouge are in poor condition, 30% in New Orleans and 39% in Lafayette.

One in four roads in Louisiana is rated as poor, according to the TRIP study. The report said one-third of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier and that most bridges are designed to last 50 years.

The Blanco report also focused on bridge conditions.

"After normalizing bridge area to the size of the state, Louisiana stands out as having by far the worst condition of bridges, with the amount of bridge area in poor condition more than nine times as much as Texas and Alabama, more than seven times as much as Florida and more than three times as much as Arkansas or Mississippi," it says.

Whether road and bridge spending will change this year is unclear.

The state is getting \$3.2 billion from the latest round of federal stimulus dollars, and some state leaders favor using part of the money on infrastructure.

Earlier state Rep. Jack McFarland, R-Jonesboro, proposed a bill that would boost the state gas tax by 10 cents per gallon initially, and 22 cents eventually, to boost annual road and bridge money by \$660 million.

McFarland has since dropped the bid after Gov. John Bel Edwards and Senate President Page Cortez, R-Lafayette, said they doubted the proposal could gain the two-thirds support needed for legislative approval.

Lawmakers who oppose any hike in the gas tax say their constituents are unwilling to pay more.

Rep. Barbara Freiberg, R-Baton Rouge, is sponsoring what was McFarland's bill in hopes of generating a discussion on road and bridge needs.

The TRIP report said its conclusions are based on data provided by the Federal Highway Administration.

The \$7.6 billion includes additional vehicle operating costs to drive on rough roads, lost time and wasted fuel sparked by congestion and the costs of traffic crashes.

The Blanco Public Policy Center is named after former Gov. Kathleen Blanco.

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