

Louisiana Roads and Bridges Need Major Investment

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Roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost Louisiana motorists a total of \$7.6 billion statewide annually – as much as \$2,431 per driver in some areas – due to higher vehicle operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays. Increased investment in transportation improvements at the local, state and federal levels could relieve traffic congestion, improve road, bridge and transit conditions, boost safety, and support short- and long-term economic growth in Louisiana, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

The TRIP report, “Louisiana Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State’s Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility,” finds that throughout Louisiana, nearly half of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 13% of locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and more than 3,700 people lost their lives on the state’s roads from 2015-2019. Louisiana’s major urban roads are congested, causing significant delays and choking commuting and commerce.

Driving on Louisiana roads costs the state’s drivers \$7.6 billion per year in the form of extra vehicle operating costs (VOC) as a result of driving on roads in need of repair, lost time and fuel due to congestion-related delays, and the costs of traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway features, while not the primary cause, likely were a contributing factor. The report includes regional pavement and bridge conditions, a list of the most congested corridors, highway safety data, and cost breakdowns for the Baton Rouge, Lafayette, New Orleans and Shreveport urban areas and statewide.

Due to inadequate state and local funding, nearly half of major roads and highways in Louisiana are in poor or mediocre condition. Twenty-five percent of major roads in the state are in poor condition and 22% are in mediocre condition. Seventeen percent of the state’s major roads are in fair condition and the remaining 36% are in good condition. Driving on rough roads costs the average Louisiana driver \$667 annually in additional vehicle operating costs – a total of \$2.3 billion statewide.

“If the Governor and the Legislature can’t lead on transportation issues to significantly increase funding, Louisiana will continue to rank as one of the worst places for infrastructure and, here in our Capital Region, for traffic congestion,” said Adam Knapp, president and CEO of the Baton Rouge Area Chamber. “When will they decide that enough

is enough? When will we decide to hold them accountable for their failure to pass structural reforms for transportation? They can do it this year, this Legislative session, and they should. Infrastructure is the key to Louisiana’s future job growth, for everyone.”

Thirteen percent of Louisiana’s bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the seventh highest share in the nation. Bridges that are in poor/structurally deficient condition have significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Thirty-nine percent of the state’s bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 48% are in good condition. Most bridges are designed to last 50 years before major overhaul or replacement, although many newer bridges are being designed to last 75 years or longer. In Louisiana, 33% of the state’s bridges were built in 1969 or earlier.

“The Baton Rouge and New Orleans metros have long been bound by economic ties, but the deteriorating and congested infrastructure between the two severely limits growth,” said Erin Monroe Wesley, 2021 chair of the SoLA Super Region Committee and southeast vice president of government and public affairs for Cox Communications. “This is a fixable problem. Lost revenue for businesses, lost time for commuters, and lost opportunity for everyone does not have to be our future reality. Investment in our infrastructure must be a priority.”

Traffic crashes in Louisiana claimed the lives of 3,738 people from 2015 to 2019, 20% of whom were pedestrians or bicyclists. Louisiana’s overall traffic fatality rate of 1.42 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2019 is higher than the national average of 1.11 and the eighth highest in the United States. The traffic fatality rate on Louisiana’s rural, non-Interstate roadways in 2019 was approximately two-and-a-half times higher than on all other roads (2.52 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 1.04). From 2015 to 2019, there were 630 pedestrian and 130 bicycle fatalities in Louisiana, 20% of the total number of traffic fatalities in the state. The annual statewide financial impact of traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway safety features, while not the primary cause, were likely a contributing factor was a total of \$2.3 billion.

“This report highlights the high price we pay for our congestion,” said Scott Kirkpatrick, executive director of Capital Region Industry for Sustainable Infrastructure Solutions (CRISIS). “We need to get serious about infrastructure funding to build a south bridge in Baton Rouge and allow interstate drivers to bypass this congestion.”

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, vehicle travel in Louisiana dropped by as much as 36% in April 2020 (as compared to vehicle travel during the same month the previous year), but rebounded to 6% below the previous year’s volume in January 2021. Congested roads choke commuting and commerce and cost Louisiana drivers \$3 billion each year in the form of lost time and wasted fuel. In Louisiana’s most congested urban areas, drivers lose up to \$1,312, spend as many as 60 extra hours per year stuck in traffic and waste 26 gallons of fuel due to congestion. “It’s painfully obvious to any driver who has traveled Louisiana’s roads that our state has an endless number of infrastructure needs,” said Stephen Waguespack, president and CEO of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI). “The condition of our roads and bridges has a real impact on our homegrown companies and ultimately, their bottom line. The business community looks forward to working with Congress, the Legislature, local governments and other stakeholders to ensure we advance a common-sense solution to address these problems.”

The efficiency and condition of Louisiana’s transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state’s economy. Annually, \$584 billion in goods are shipped to and from Louisiana, relying heavily on the state’s network of roads and bridges. Increasingly, companies are looking at the quality of a region’s transportation system when deciding where to re-locate or expand. Regions with congested or poorly maintained roads may see businesses relocate to areas with a smoother, more efficient and more modern transportation system.

“Until the Louisiana Legislature decides to tackle the long-term transportation infrastructure spending, Louisiana will continue to fall behind with the condition of our roads and bridges,” said Ken Naquin, CEO of LAGC. “Louisiana is the only Southern state to not have addressed long-term transportation infrastructure spending in the last five years. The only state, and yet we continue to decline in the area of economic growth.”

“These conditions are only going to get worse, increasing the additional costs to motorists, if greater investment is not made available at the federal, state and local levels of government,” said Dave Kearby, TRIP’s executive director. “Without adequate funding, Louisiana’s transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life.”