

North Dakota's Major Urban Roads in Poor Condition

April 6, 2021 | Rock Products News

While recent increases in state transportation funding have started to provide local governments in North Dakota some assistance in addressing their transportation needs, the state will face challenges in maintaining and improving road and bridge conditions, safety and reliability without additional transportation funding. Increased investment in transportation improvements at the local, state and federal levels could improve road and bridge conditions, boost safety, ease congestion and improve reliability, and support long-term economic growth in North Dakota, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

According to the TRIP report, "Keeping North Dakota Moving Forward: Progress and Challenges in Providing a Modern Surface Transportation System," the increased transportation funding provided to local governments by the state legislature's passage of HB 1066 "Operation Prairie Dog" in 2019 has started to provide some assistance to local governments in addressing their transportation needs. But, at its current level of transportation investment, North Dakota will be challenged to maintain and improve current road and bridge conditions, safety and reliability.

The TRIP report finds that nearly half of North Dakota's major locally and state-maintained urban roads are in poor condition, one in 10 locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and 564 people lost their lives on the state's roads from 2015-2019. Some of North Dakota's major urban roads are congested, causing delays and choking commuting and commerce.

Forty-four percent of North Dakota's major locally and state-maintained urban roads are in poor condition, 33% are in fair condition, and the remaining 23% are in good condition. Driving on deteriorated roads costs North Dakota's drivers an average of \$410 each year – \$230 million statewide – in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear.

Ten percent of North Dakota's bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition. Bridges that are rated poor/structurally deficient have significant deterioration of

the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Thirty-six percent of the state's bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 54% 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 North Dakota, 46% of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier.

"Counties and county officials were very pleased with the thoroughness of the TRIP report," said Terry Traynor, executive director of the North Dakota Association of Counties. "It provides research-based conclusions regarding the gap between existing and needed funding that are consistent with our understanding of the statewide situation. The report's focus on safety in conjunction with roadway and bridge conditions is critically important." Traffic crashes in North Dakota claimed the lives of 564 people from 2015 to 2019. While the state's overall 2019 traffic fatality rate of 1.02 fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled is below the national average of 1.11, the fatality rate on North Dakota's non-interstate rural roads is approximately triple that of all other roads in the state (1.49 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.48).

Improving safety on North Dakota's roadways can be achieved through further improvements in vehicle safety; improvements in driver, pedestrian, and bicyclist behavior; and, a variety of improvements in roadway safety features. The 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 \$788 million annually in North Dakota.

"The TRIP report demonstrates the need for increased and continued investment in North Dakota's transportation system, particularly our network of rural roads and bridges, which provide a vital link for the state's agricultural, energy extraction and tourism sectors and keep our economy moving in the right direction," said Arik Spencer, president and CEO of the North Dakota Chamber.

Congested roads and bottlenecks choke commuting and commerce and cost North Dakota drivers a total of \$140 million each year in the form of lost time and wasted fuel – an average of \$331 annually per driver in Bismarck. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, vehicle travel in North Dakota dropped by as much as 32% in April 2020 (as

compared to vehicle travel during the same month the previous year) but rebounded to seven% below the previous year's volume in January 2021.

While traffic congestion is largely constrained to the state's urban areas, seasonal load restrictions on some highways due to a lack of adequate load carrying capacity can also increase congestion by requiring trucks to reduce their weight and make additional trips, which results in additional truck traffic. The TRIP report identifies the most congested locations on North Dakota highways. "The North Dakota Transportation Coalition continues to advocate and educate policymakers about the ever-increasing funding gap in our state's needs and where infrastructure funding exists today – and the legislation that could help fill that gap," said Scott Meske, spokesperson for the North Dakota Transportation Coalition. "Our state is fortunate to have access to various sources of short-term funding options. However, the challenge is to structure our funding sources to meet the long-term needs of our state's roads, bridges and streets."

The efficiency and condition of North Dakota's transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state's economy. Annually, \$199 billion in goods are shipped to and from North Dakota, 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. Approximately 215,000 full-time jobs in North Dakota in key industries like tourism, retail sales, agriculture and manufacturing are dependent on the quality, safety and reliability of the state's transportation infrastructure network.

"It is critical that North Dakota builds on the steps taken in 2019 to boost available transportation funding to ensure the state moves forward with a robust and reliable transportation plan capable of improving mobility and accessibility, which is vital to the state's residents, businesses and visitors," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director.