

Return trip: Study shows drivers hitting the roads again as pandemic eases



Ed Blazina, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette
eblazina@post-gazette.com | May 31, 2021

Road traffic bottomed out 15 months ago as a result of stay-at-home orders at the start of the pandemic. Empty roads meant fewer people were out spending money or going to work, driving a huge hole in the transportation budgets built in many states on gasoline tax revenue.

Now, those roads are beginning to fill up again, although not necessarily at the same times as before. With pandemic restrictions easing, that signals Americans appear to be moving toward whatever the new version of normal will be.

A national study released last week by TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research agency, found that 15 states already returned to or passed pre-pandemic traffic levels by March, and overall traffic across the country had recovered to be only 3% below March 2019 levels.

Traffic levels in Pennsylvania and the Pittsburgh area remain below March 2019, but officials say they are trending in the right direction.

The TRIP study said the pandemic had a "profound" effect on road traffic initially with miles driven falling by 40% nationally in April 2020 compared with the previous year. That has slowly rebounded since then, dropping to 9% lower by October and 7% by March.

Nationally, Montana has had the strongest traffic surge with vehicle miles traveled increasing by 13.3% compared with March 2019. The agency also is seeing a different traffic pattern than before the pandemic with morning rush hours nationally being less crowded, midday traffic higher than before the pandemic and evening rush hours back to normal.

Traffic in Pennsylvania reached its lowest point in April 2020, when it dropped by 47% below the previous year, and it remained at 7% below March 2019.

The number of individual trips taken each day in Pennsylvania dropped from 54 million in April 2019 to 35.2 million a year later. In March this year, Pennsylvanians took 49.9 million trips.

Alexis Campbell, spokeswoman for the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, said weekend traffic, in particular, has picked up in recent months. Weekday traffic is 8% to 10% below pre-pandemic figures while weekend traffic is 3% to 4% below.

Statewide, weekday rush-hour traffic remains down 10% to 12% and midday and overnight traffic remains 4% to 6% below.

The other indicator of traffic increasing on Pennsylvania roads is gasoline tax revenue. Revenue reached its low point of \$191.6 million in May 2020, \$154.4 million below the previous year.

For April 2021, the state collected \$294.3 million, just under \$15 million below the same month in 2019.

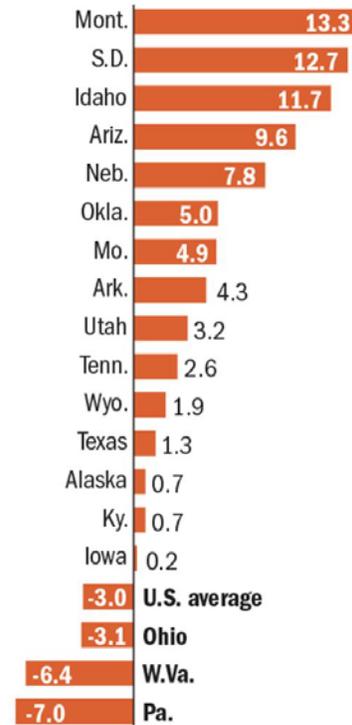
"However, even with these revenues beginning to return, we know we can't rely on the gas tax to meet our highway and bridge needs," Ms. Campbell said in an email. "Not only is the gas tax incredibly vulnerable to changes in

States where traffic levels have returned

Motorists are heading back onto roads across the country with 15 states showing vehicles miles traveled increasing above pre-pandemic levels.

MILES TRAVELED

States with largest increase in vehicle miles of travel compared to Pa., Ohio, and W.Va., March 2019 to March 2021:



PA. AVERAGE TRIPS PER DAY

In millions of trips



PA. VEHICLE MILES TRAVELED

In billions of miles



Source: Study by TRIP, a national nonprofit transportation research agency

James Hilston/Post-Gazette

travel patterns, like we saw during COVID, but with increased fuel efficiency and adoption of electric vehicles, it's becoming even less reliable. "Our challenge now is transitioning from reliance on the gas tax, raising enough revenue to keep up with inflation, and addressing our aging infrastructure."

Gov. Tom Wolf has appointed a committee to review alternate funding sources for transportation projects. It is expected to make recommendations by early August.

In Allegheny County, road traffic also remains below 2019 levels, said Todd Kravitz, traffic engineer for PennDOT's District 11, which includes Allegheny, Beaver and Lawrence counties.

"We're nearing 90% of where we were before the pandemic," Mr. Kravitz said. "Our midday traffic volume is almost back to normal."

Rush hours here are mimicking the national pattern with lower volumes in the morning rush and normal delays in the evening.

"It seems like if people are going into Downtown Pittsburgh for work, some are going later but they're all leaving at the same time," Mr. Kravitz said.

With mask and distancing restrictions easing this week to allow normal capacity at restaurants and other venues, Mr. Kravitz said, it's possible that evening or weekend traffic will be the first to return to normal in this area.

In neighboring states, Ohio's miles traveled dropped 39% below 2019 in March 2020 and remain 3.1% below. West Virginia was 40% below in March 2020 and is still 6.4% behind.

Ed Blazina: eblazina@post-gazette.com, 412-263-1470 or on Twitter @EdBlazina.