

Viewpoint: The interstate system turns 65 — it's time to modernize it

‘Our rapidly deteriorating infrastructure is a clear and present danger to our nation’s supply chain’

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(Photo by Walter Parenteau/Flickr)

This commentary was written by Dave Kearby, executive director at [TRIP](#). The views expressed here are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of FreightWaves or its affiliates.

By Dave Kearby

As the U.S. interstate highway system reaches 65 years old on Tuesday, it is congested, carries significant levels of travel — particularly by large trucks — and lacks adequate funding to make needed repairs and improvements. America’s most critical transportation link will need to be rebuilt and expanded to meet the nation’s growing transportation needs, according to a report released by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.

The report — “[America’s Interstate Highway System at 65: Meeting America’s Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network](#)” — looks at the interstate system’s use, condition and benefits, and the findings of a 2019 report, prepared by the Transportation Research Board (TRB) at the request of Congress as part of the Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, on the condition and use of the interstate system and actions required to restore and upgrade the interstate system.

The chart below ranks states whose interstate systems are the most congested, have experienced the greatest increase in vehicle miles of travel (VMT) since 2000, are busiest (based on daily travel per lane mile), have the largest share of pavement in poor condition, and have the greatest share of bridges in poor/structurally deficient condition.

RANK	Congested Urban Interstates		2000-19 Interstate VMT Increase		Daily Interstate Travel per Lane Mile		Interstate Pavement in Poor Condition		Interstate Bridges Poor/Structurally Deficient	
1	California	87%	Nevada	69%	California	20,957	Hawaii	23%	West Virginia	13%
2	Maryland	83%	Louisiana	61%	Maryland	20,214	Delaware	9%	Rhode Island	12%
3	New Jersey	81%	North Carolina	57%	Hawaii	17,864	New Jersey	9%	Illinois	8%
4	Delaware	71%	Utah	57%	Colorado	17,702	Louisiana	7%	Massachusetts	7%
5	Florida	70%	Colorado	53%	Florida	17,145	New York	6%	New York	6%
6	Massachusetts	68%	Texas	49%	Texas	17,123	Colorado	6%	Michigan	6%
7	Rhode Island	65%	Mississippi	45%	Rhode Island	16,644	Michigan	6%	Colorado	5%
8	Connecticut	63%	Idaho	44%	Massachusetts	16,326	California	6%	Maine	5%
9	Hawaii	60%	Wisconsin	42%	Washington	16,251	Maryland	5%	Washington	5%
10	Washington	58%	Florida	41%	New Jersey	16,053	Indiana	5%	Missouri	5%
11	Texas	58%	North Dakota	41%	Delaware	15,956	Pennsylvania	5%	Idaho	4%
12	Georgia	57%	South Carolina	39%	Connecticut	15,514	Washington	5%	Pennsylvania	4%
13	Colorado	57%	New Jersey	36%	Georgia	15,325	South Carolina	4%	Wyoming	3%
14	Minnesota	56%	Arkansas	35%	Virginia	15,207	Arkansas	4%	Montana	3%
15	New Hampshire	54%	Montana	34%	Nevada	15,130	Illinois	4%	Louisiana	3%
16	Virginia	52%	Alabama	33%	Arizona	15,016	Oklahoma	4%	California	3%
17	Kentucky	51%	Tennessee	33%	Tennessee	14,718	Minnesota	4%	Connecticut	3%
18	South Carolina	50%	South Dakota	30%	Louisiana	14,452	Alabama	4%	New Mexico	3%
19	Utah	49%	Iowa	27%	Kentucky	14,404	Ohio	3%	New Jersey	3%
20	Ohio	48%	Kentucky	26%	Minnesota	14,236	West Virginia	3%	North Carolina	3%
	U.S Average	47%	U.S Average	26%	U.S Average	14,742	U.S Average	3%	U.S Average	3%

According to the 2019 TRB report, the interstate system has a persistent and growing backlog of physical and operational deficiencies as a result of age, heavy use and deferred reinvestment, and is in need of major reconstruction and modernization. The TRB report concludes that annual investment in the interstate highway system should be increased approximately 2 1/2 times, from \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years.

“The report released by TRIP confirms what American businesses experience every day — our Interstate Highway System, which was once the envy of the world, is in serious need of modernization,” said Ed Mortimer, vice president of transportation infrastructure, U.S. Chamber of Commerce. “Commitment to modernization must be shared by federal, state and local leaders as well as the private sector. The Interstate system plays a key national role in economic success and quality of life for every American, and we urge bipartisan solutions this year to address this critical issue.”

The TRIP report found that from 2000-2019, travel on the interstate system, the importance of which was heightened during the COVID-19 pandemic, has increased by 26% — a rate nearly triple that at which new lane capacity was added. As a result, 47% of urban interstate highways are considered congested during peak hours.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, vehicle travel on U.S. highways dropped by as much as 45% in April 2020 (compared to April 2019) but rebounded to 6% below April 2019 levels by April 2021.

The report also found that travel by combination trucks on the interstate increased at a rate more than double that of overall vehicle travel between 2000 and 2019: 43% vs. 19%.

“Our rapidly deteriorating infrastructure is a clear and present danger to our nation’s supply chain. Breakdowns in the Interstate Highway System add an annual \$75 billion to the cost of freight transportation, and 67 million tons of excess carbon dioxide emissions are released into the atmosphere every year from trucks stuck in traffic congestion,” said Chris Spear, president and CEO of the American Trucking Associations. “This report quantifies how severe this crisis has become, and it underscores the urgent need for Congress to make real infrastructure investments that are backed by a fair and equitable user-based revenue source.”

The design of the interstate — which includes a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, paved shoulders and median barriers — makes it more than twice as safe to travel on as all other roadways. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on the interstate in 2019 was 0.55, compared to 1.3 on non-interstate routes.

TRIP estimates that additional safety features on the interstate highway system saved 6,555 lives in 2019.

“AAA supports increased federal investment for the Interstate Highway System. Significant funding is needed to ensure safe, efficient and reliable mobility across the United States,” said Jill Ingrassia, AAA executive director of advocacy and communications. “AAA urges Congress and the administration to come together to get this important work done.”

TRIP’s report finds that while pavement smoothness on most segments of the interstate system is acceptable, the crumbling foundations of most highway segments need to be reconstructed, and that continued resurfacing — rather than addressing underlying foundational issues — is resulting in diminishing returns and results in shorter periods of pavement smoothness.

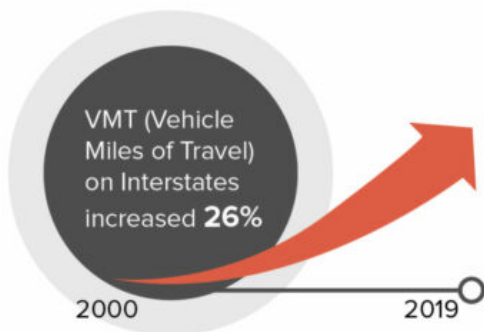
U.S. INTERSTATE HIGHWAY SYSTEM



Interstate Highway System accounts for

2.6% of all lane miles

26% of all vehicle travel



47% OF URBAN INTERSTATES ARE CONGESTED DURING PEAK HOURS



NEEDED REPAIRS AND IMPROVEMENTS

\$123 BILLION BACKLOG

\$54 BILLION
pavements

\$37 BILLION
bridges

\$33 BILLION
enhancements and expansion

INCREASED INVESTMENT NEEDED

\$57 BILLION ANNUALLY

Investment in the Interstate Highway System should be increased from \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years

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Graphic courtesy of TRIP

As the aging system's foundations continue to deteriorate, most interstate highways, bridges and interchanges will need to be rebuilt or replaced, the TRB report finds. According to the TRIP report, pavements on 11% of interstate highways are in poor or mediocre condition, while 3% of interstate bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition and 57% are rated in fair condition.

Restoring and upgrading the interstate highway system to meet the nation's 21st century transportation needs will require a significant boost in funding, strong federal leadership and a robust federal-state partnership to reestablish the interstate highway system as the nation's premier transportation network.

The current federal surface transportation program, the FAST Act, the primary source of interstate highway funding, expired on Sept. 30, 2020, and was extended by one year by Congress to Sept. 30, 2021. Reauthorization of a new long-term, adequately and reliably funded federal program will be needed to ensure that a strong federal program supports the restoration of the interstate system.

Based on the findings of the TRB interstate report, TRIP has provided a set of recommendations for the restoration of the interstate highway system, which includes: the foundational reconstruction of interstate highways, bridges and interchanges; improvement to roadway safety features; system right-sizing, including upgrading of some roadway corridors to interstate standards; adding needed highway capacity on existing routes; adding more corridors; and modifying some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption.

The long-term vision that helped establish the current interstate highway system 65 years ago is needed again today. A modernized interstate system will be critical to the nation's ability to fully recover from the COVID-19 pandemic and will require adequate investment in a federal surface transportation program that provides states and local governments the funding and flexibility they will need to restore the nation's most critical transportation link.



TRIP Executive Director Dave Kearby brings experience in the surface transportation field, having served with the Associated General Contractors of Washington for more than a decade as well as chair and board member of TRANSAction, one of Washington State's first regional transportation partnerships. Besides managing the day-to-day operations of TRIP, he serves as a spokesperson to the news media.