

TRIP report: West Virginia's interstate highway bridges worst in the nation

By David Beard, The Dominion Post, Morgantown, W.Va. | Saturday, June 26, 2021

Jun. 26—MORGANTOWN — West Virginia ranks worst in the nation for interstate highway bridge deterioration and is tied for seventh-worst for interstate pavement condition, according to a new report released this month by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.

The report is called "America's Interstate Highway System at 65" and looks at conditions in every state, and how much it will cost to get the entire system up to par. It's drawn from a report commissioned by Congress in 2015 and conducted and released by the Transportation Research Board — a division of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine — in 2019.

The Interstate Highway System covers 48,482 miles, over routes that range from just 18 miles to more than 3,000 miles, TRIP said.

TRIP said 41% of West Virginia's interstate bridges are 50 years old or older; 13% are rated poor/structurally deficient, meaning they show significant signs of wear on the bridge deck, supports or other components. The Federal Highway Administration says bridges in that category either need immediate rehabilitation to remain open, are restricted to lighter-weight traffic or are closed.

Among West Virginia's neighbors, Pennsylvania ties for seventh-worst, with 4% of its interstate bridges rated poor/structurally deficient.

In the area of pavement quality, 11% of the nation's interstate highways are rated poor, meaning cracked or broken. West Virginia is tied with neighbor Ohio for seventh-worst with 3% of interstate highway pavement rated poor.

Maryland and Pennsylvania are among the states tied for fifth-worst, with 5% rated poor.

TRIP said, "The Interstate Highway 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."

Most interstate roadway segments retain their original underlying foundations and need to be completely rebuilt from the subbase up, Trip said. "Repeated resurfacing — rather than addressing underlying foundational issues — provides diminishing returns as additional resurfacing results in increasingly shorter periods of pavement smoothness and is likely to result in higher lifecycle costs than periodic reconstruction."

TRIP said modernizing the entire system must include reconstruction of the majority of interstate highways and bridges, including their foundations; the upgrade of most interchanges to improve their function and safety; the addition of capacity along existing corridors, the construction of new routes and the conversion of some existing routes to interstate standards; the modification of some urban segments to maintain connectivity while remediating economic and social disruption; and, further improvement of highway safety features.

It'll cost a bundle. There's a \$123 billion backlog: \$54 billion in pavement repairs, \$37 billion in bridge work and \$33 billion in enhancements and expansion.

The Transportation Research Board estimates that addressing the many deficiencies will require Congress to raise annual appropriations for the Interstate Highway System from \$24 billion (in 2018) to \$57 billion for the next 20 years.

Congress is debating a proposed infrastructure package that would add \$579 billion across the next five years, along with reappropriating \$394 billion over the same span. The proposal would devote \$110 billion in new spending on roads, bridges and major projects across five years.

Sen. Shelley Moore Capito took a question about the report and West Virginia's bridges during a press conference this week. She said, "There's lots the federal government can do and should do and will do to help with the repair of our bridges and our roads."

When the Environment and Public Works Committee — where she serves as ranking member — passed its five-year surface transportation plan, she included a set-aside for bridges and believes the infrastructure package needs to do the same. Then it needs to get passed by the Senate and the House and get to the president. "We need to do it now," she said.

Mike Clowser, chairman of the West Virginia Business and Industry Council and executive director of the Contractors Association of West Virginia, submitted a comment with the release of the TRIP report.

"West Virginia has made great progress over the past four years in building and rehabilitating its interstate and secondary road system," he said. "Gov. Jim Justice championed his \$1.6 billion Roads to Prosperity road bond amendment, and the West Virginia Legislature increased revenues for the State Road Fund."

"This has provided additional funding for highways but, as TRIP notes, Congress must act to reauthorize a federal-aid highway funding bill," Clowser said. "The state's businesses require a safe and modern transportation system to move goods and services. Quick passage of a new federal highway bill will allow West Virginia to address its critical transportation infrastructure needs."

Tweet @dbeardtdp