

August marks 65 years since Missouri became first state to move forward with plans for our country's first interstate system



By [Joe Hickman](#) | Monday, August 16, 2021

SPRINGFIELD, Mo. (KY3) - If you've ever grown frustrated driving down a two-lane highway waiting anxiously for the chance to pass the car in front of you then you should be celebrating an important milestone this month that changed our transportation system forever.

It was 1956 when President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal Aid Highway Act, which called for the construction of a 41,000 mile system of interstate highways that would change the way we drive.

And just as Springfield played a key role in the naming of Route 66, Lebanon has its place in the history books not only for Route 66 but for its part in the expansion of the Mother Road into a four-lane highway.

That's because Missouri was the first state in the country to award interstate construction contracts in August, 1956 for portions of I-44 in Laclede County and a portion of I-70 in St. Charles County.

"This stretch of I-44 just outside Lebanon was actually the first contract let under Eisenhower's Interstate Highway Act," said Mark Spangler, the Curator at Lebanon's Route 66 Museum. "When we finished our stretch out here it had a Route 66 sign on it. It had not been assigned as Interstate 44 yet."

So how is Missouri's interstate system doing these days? Well, a Washington, D.C.-based organization known as TRIP is a national transportation research nonprofit that just released its latest research on Missouri's interstate system.

"At 65 years-old, when most people are considering retirement or a reduced work load, Missouri and the nation's interstates are busier and working harder than ever," said Carolyn Kelly, TRIP's Director of Communications and Research. "Missouri's nearly 1,400 miles of interstate are the workhorse of the state's transportation network. They carry 21.5 million vehicle-miles of travel each year. And since those shovels first hit

the dirt in 1956 the number of vehicles in Missouri has increased more than three-and-a-half times and the state's population has increased by more than two million residents."

That increased traffic also includes a lot of commerce as Missouri is tied with Montana for the 8th highest rate of large truck travel in the nation, accounting for 17 percent of all interstate traffic in the state. Arkansas ranks second with 28 percent, trailing only Wyoming (30 percent.)

The TRIP report's research includes an examination of Missouri's interstate pavement conditions, bridge conditions, travel trends, congestion levels and traffic safety.

And as you would expect the interstate system is showing signs of advancing age and deterioration.

"Five percent of the state's interstate bridges are rated in poor or structurally-deficient condition," Kelly said. "That's the 10th highest rate in the nation. About half of Missouri's interstate bridges are more than 50 years old which is an age at which many bridges need significant repairs or even replacement."

The good news is only one percent of Missouri's interstate pavement is considered to be in poor condition, which is lower than the national average of three percent. The TRIP report said 89 percent of Missouri's interstate road pavement is considered in good condition with the remaining ten percent ranked in either fair or mediocre condition.

Another positive sign is that although the Missouri interstate system carries 27 percent of the state's travel, it accounts for only 17 percent of the fatalities. The report said that's because of interstate safety measures like cable barriers, railings, paved shoulders, rumble strips and less curvy roads.

Missouri Gov. Mike Parson has made fixing bridges and highways one of his main priorities and the TRIP report pointed out that just last month Parson signed into law a critical first step in funding highway projects that is expected to provide an additional \$450 million annually. However, the TRIP report also points out that nationwide there's a backlog of needed improvements for the interstate system totaling \$123 billion.

But considering that each year \$481 billion in goods are shipped to-and-from sites in Missouri, primarily by trucks, it's important to keep our interstate highways in good shape.

"No one could have envisioned the impact that automobile traffic was going to have on our economy," Spangler said.