

Missouri Roads in Need of a Fix

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Sixty-five years ago this week, the first ground was broken in Missouri on what would become the U.S. Interstate Highway System. On its 65th anniversary, the Interstate Highway System is the most critical transportation network in Missouri, according to a new report from TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.

A new report released by TRIP, entitled “Restoring Missouri’s Interstate Highway System: Meeting Missouri’s Transportation Needs with a Reliable, Safe & Well-Maintained National Highway Network,” examines pavement and bridge conditions, congestion, safety and travel trends on Missouri’s interstate system.

At 65 years old, Missouri’s 1,380-mile Interstate Highway System remains the workhorse of the state’s surface transportation network: heavily traveled and providing the most important link in the supply chain, and the primary connection between and within urban communities.

The importance of the Interstate Highway System and the reliable movement of goods it provides has been heightened during the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. But many Interstate highways are wearing out and showing signs of their advanced age, often heavily congested, and in need of significant reconstruction, modernization and expansion.

While Missouri’s Interstate Highway System accounts for 2% of all roadway lane miles in the state, it carries 27% of the state’s vehicle travel – 21.5 million vehicle miles of travel annually. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, vehicle travel on Missouri’s roads dropped by as much as 38% in April 2020 (as compared to vehicle travel during the same month the previous year) but rebounded to three% above May 2019 (the previous pre-COVID-19 May) levels by May 2021.

The TRIP report finds that 47% of Missouri’s urban Interstate highways are considered congested because they carry traffic levels that result in significant delays during peak travel hours. Travel by combination trucks accounted for 17% of all vehicle miles of travel on Missouri’s Interstate Highway System in 2019, the ninth highest rate in the nation.

According to TRIP’s report, 5% of Missouri’s Interstate bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, the 10th highest rate in the nation. A bridge is rated in poor/structurally deficient condition if there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components.

Seventy-one percent of the state’s Interstate bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 25% are in good condition. Fifty-six percent of Missouri’s Interstate bridges are at least 50 years old, and the average age of the state’s Interstate bridges is 46 years. One percent of Missouri’s Interstates have pavement in poor condition, lower than the national average of 3%. Four percent of Missouri’s Interstate pavements are rated in mediocre condition, 5% are in fair condition and the remaining 89% are in good condition.

The design of the Interstate Highway System – which includes a separation from other roads and rail lines, a minimum of four lanes, paved shoulders and median barriers – makes Missouri’s Interstates nearly twice as safe to travel on as all other roadways in the state.

The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on Missouri’s Interstate in 2019 was 0.69 compared to 1.27 on the state’s non-Interstate routes. TRIP estimates that additional safety features on Missouri’s Interstate Highway System saved 137 lives in 2019. While Missouri’s Interstate Highway System carried 27% of the state’s travel in 2019, it accounted for only 17% of the state’s traffic fatalities as a result of superior safety features.

“The safety of the traveling public, MoDOT employees, and those craftworkers building and maintaining the system is paramount to AGC of Missouri and its members,” said Len Toenjes, president of Associated General Contractors (AGC) of Missouri. “Our contractors are proud to be partners with MoDOT in making the Interstate Highway System an effective method for growing the economy of our state through better movement of goods and jobs creation. We must continue to work together to ensure this system performs well into the future.”

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 July 2021 legislative approval of SB 262, which was subsequently signed into law by Governor Parson, provides a critical first step towards addressing the underfunding of Missouri’s Interstate Highway System and is expected to provide an additional \$450 million annually once fully implemented.

Another critical source of Interstate funding in Missouri is the current federal surface transportation program, Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST Act), which expires on September 30, 2021. Reauthorization of a new long-term, adequately and reliably funded long-term federal program will provide another critical step towards ensuring that a strong federal program supports the restoration of the Interstate system.

Based on the findings of a 2019 report by the Transportation Research Board (TRB) that was requested by Congress, TRIP has provided a set of recommendations for the restoration of the Interstate Highway System, which include: 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 additional highway capacity on existing routes; adding additional 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 system 65 years ago is needed again today,” said Dave Kearby, TRIP’s executive director. “Missouri has taken important steps to provide increased investment in its transportation system that will improve conditions, enhance efficiency and improve quality of life. Adequate transportation investment and a sustainable, long-term funding source for the federal surface transportation program must remain a priority in Missouri and the nation.”