

SC's aging roads have U.S.'s highest fatality rate, cost drivers \$2.1B a year, report shows

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Traffic heads eastbound along I-26 North of Summerville on March 12, 2021. Andrew J. Whitaker/Staff awhitaker@postandcourier.com
Gail Fludd Washington has been making trips back and forth between Columbia and Charleston for almost 26 years. Though a long-time resident of Columbia, she grew up in the Charleston area and often returns for family gatherings and work functions.

So she knows *all about* Interstate 26. The road-weary veteran talks about driving the highway like she's deploying for battle.

"If I go into that traffic, I got to manage it well," she said. "I can't let it manage me."

That means leaving extra early and having friends ready on speed dial if she is stuck behind a crash.

"I just tack on the hours," she said, adding later. "I really don't know from one location to the next what kind of traffic jam I'm going to find myself into, what kind of bumper-to-bumper traffic it's going to be on the interstate."

She remembered once canceling a trip to Charleston after sitting in the worst traffic she had ever seen.

"We had traveled down the road a ways, and the traffic was just back-to-back with no relief in sight," she said. "I turned around. Even I couldn't handle that one."

Washington is one of many commuters who regularly brave bumper-to-bumper traffic and frequent crashes on Interstate 26 between Columbia and Charleston.

Five crashes alone were reported before 7:30 a.m. on Sept. 21 on the highway, clogging the eastbound lanes of traffic for 25 miles between Summerville and downtown Charleston.

A new report from the D.C.-based nonprofit The Road Information Program, known as TRIP, highlights some of the problems that congestion on South Carolina's major highways and roads, including Interstate 26, has created for residents and businesses.

While recent increased spending on traffic infrastructure has allowed the state to move forward with projects to improve safety and accelerate road and bridge repairs, the

organization said, the state still faces challenges in maintaining its aging system.

In its report, the organization estimates road congestion alone costs South Carolina drivers \$2.1 billion a year in the form of lost time and wasted fuel. The average motorist in Charleston wastes 56 hours a year sitting in traffic, which costs them \$1,165, according to the report. In Columbia, motorists waste on average 43 hours in traffic each year, at a cost of \$842.

More than just headaches, congested roads create dangers for motorists.

From 2015 to 2019, 5,018 people were killed in traffic crashes in South Carolina, approximately 1,000 people per year, according to the report.

"Clearly a number that is far too high," Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, said in a Sept. 22 videocall announcing the study's findings.

The state's 2019 traffic fatality rate of 1.73 fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled is the highest rate in the country, the report states, and significantly higher than the national average of 1.11 deaths per 100 million miles in 2019.

From 2014 to 2019, vehicle travel in South Carolina increased by 14 percent, the fifth-highest rate of travel growth in the nation, the report states. Vehicle travel dipped in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but by June 2021 it had rebounded to pre-pandemic levels.

"Travel is back and as you would anticipate, that means we are seeing traffic congestion levels returning to pre-pandemic levels across the state," Moretti said.

South Carolina has experienced tremendous population growth in recent decades, particularly in coastal and metropolitan areas. But that growth places continuing pressure on public resources, including transportation infrastructure, the report states.

Forty-three percent of South Carolina's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, the report states, and 8 percent of the state's bridges are rated poor or structurally deficient.

Traffic congestion in South Carolina

Location	Hours Lost To Congestion	Annual Cost Per Driver	Gallons Of Fuel Wasted Per Driver
Charleston	56	\$1,165	22
Columbia	43	\$842	17
Florence	30	\$697	13
GSA Metro	26	\$615	12
Myrtle Beach	32	\$745	14

In 2017, the state Legislature passed the S.C. Infrastructure and Economic Development Reform Act, also known as Act 40, to fund repairs for the state's crumbling roads and bridges.

Funded in part by increases in gasoline taxes and vehicle registration fees, Act 40 provides an approximate \$600 million annual boost to the state's transportation coffers until 2027, funding

road repair and construction projects across the state.

In addition to state funding, the Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act, or FAST Act, which is set to expire on Sept. 30, has been a major source of federal funding for road and bridge repairs in the state, providing an average of \$713 million per year beginning in fiscal year 2016.

Despite the additional revenue, the S.C. Department of Transportation estimates it will still face an annual \$403 million gap in funds to make needed improvements to the state's roads, highways, bridges, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, according to TRIP's report.

That's why advocates hope federal lawmakers will pass an infrastructure bill, which could provide billions of dollars to help repair the nation's roads and bridges. A \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill passed the Senate last month with bipartisan support, but a Democrat-backed \$3.5 trillion reconciliation bill in the House has faced resistance from Republicans.

Jennifer Patterson, executive director of the South Carolina Alliance to Fix Our Roads, said while Act 40 provided a significant boost to addressing the state's traffic infrastructure challenges, roughly 75 percent of that money has gone toward repaving projects.

It's necessary work, Patterson said, but she hopes federal funding would accelerate the development of bigger projects, including widening nearly 70 miles of I-26 to three lanes each way.

"I try to tell people that there's a lot that goes into a road project before you see the crews and the orange cones and the equipment out there," she said.

The behind-the-scenes work — preliminary engineering, environmental studies and permitting — takes significant time and, of course, money.

The South Carolina Department of Transportation has already conducted some planning and engineering work on the I-26 corridor project, but construction has not yet begun.

Even if the federal infrastructure bill falls apart, Patterson suggested funding from the American Rescue Plan Act could jumpstart the widening project.

At a news conference earlier this month, Gov. Henry McMaster said he supported the idea, which would shave six years off the widening project, bringing the completion date closer to 2029.

"We in South Carolina have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," McMaster said. "This is an opportunity we cannot afford to squander." Washington supports the idea, too.

"Even 2029, that is encouraging," Washington said. "That means that there is going to come a time when we don't have to fight that traffic in the manner in which we fight the traffic now." For Washington, the battle may someday be won.

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