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The price of a pothole

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Construction on Westside Boulevard in Rio Rancho continues. Deteriorating roads in the metro area cost individual drivers \$2,604 a year in vehicle damage and maintenance. (Adolph Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

Jarred and jolted commuters who daily navigate the obstacle course of potholes, cracks, and crumbling roadways and bridges across New Mexico are paying a personal price above invective-laced frustration.

There is an actual dollar cost that includes accelerated maintenance and damage to vehicles, as well as the cost of traffic crashes and congestion-related loss of time and fuel, according to TRIP, a nonprofit Washington, D.C.-based national research organization. The yearly cost to individual drivers in the Albuquerque metro area is estimated at \$2,604; in Las Cruces, \$1,841; and in Santa Fe, \$2,020.

Statewide, the annual cost is \$3 billion.

Those estimates were released Tuesday in a report from TRIP titled “New Mexico Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the State’s Need for Safe, Smooth and Efficient Mobility.” Sources for data included the New Mexico Department of Transportation, the Federal Highway Administration, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau and the Texas Transportation Institute.

TRIP is funded by construction companies and equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers, as well as businesses involved in highway and transit engineering.

The New Mexico Department of Transportation has identified nearly \$5.1 billion in needed, but unfunded,

transportation projects throughout the state, the report said. But it also pointed to the good news that “the five-year federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, signed into law in November 2021, will provide \$2.7 billion in road, highway and bridge funding from 2022 to 2026, resulting in a 35% increase in federal funding in 2022.” As Albuquerque returns to, or exceeds, pre-pandemic travel levels, “the average motorist is losing 45 hours annually and wasting 21 gallons of fuel due to traffic congestion,” TRIP director of policy and research, Rocky Moretti, said Tuesday as part of a webinar. About 39% of major roadways in the Albuquerque area are in poor condition and another 21% are in mediocre condition, he said.



A motorist on Wednesday drives on West Central Avenue near Bridge SW, where the road is cracked and dotted with potholes. (Adolphe Pierre-Louis/Albuquerque Journal)

In Las Cruces, motorists yearly lose an average of 19 hours and nine gallons of wasted fuel because of congestion, he said. About 32% of the area’s roads are considered to be in poor condition while 36% are in mediocre condition, the report found. Motorists in Santa Fe lose an average of 29 hours and 14 gallons of wasted fuel because of congestion yearly, Moretti said. TRIP found that 32% of major roadways in that area are in poor condition and 21% are in mediocre condition.

Statewide, 34% of New Mexico’s major roads are in poor condition and 22% are in

mediocre condition, while 5% of bridges throughout the state are rated poor or structurally deficient, and 58% are rated in fair condition, the report said.

Additionally, from 2015 to 2019, 1,894 people died in traffic crashes in New Mexico. The state’s overall traffic fatality rate of 1.53 per 100 million miles of vehicle travel in 2019 was the third-highest in the nation. Roadway conditions and features, if not a primary cause of crashes, were contributing factors in at least a third of the deaths, the TRIP report said.

Among those participating in the web conference was Gregg Hull, mayor of Rio Rancho, who has overseen more than 30 major road projects in just the past five and a half years.

“Whenever you’re doing logistics, distribution, manufacturing, anything like that, having fast access to air, rail and highway is always critical in the decision-making process,” Hull said in a post-webinar interview. “The quicker you can get your product to market and get it delivered, the lower your cost of delivery and the more efficient your business.”

The TRIP report noted that \$120 billion in goods are shipped to and from New Mexico annually, “relying heavily on the state’s network of roads and bridges,” and increasingly, companies are looking at the quality of a region’s transportation system when deciding where to relocate or expand. Hull said he has observed that first hand. As road improvements were made in Rio Rancho, the number of businesses investing and relocating to that city increased. “I think a lot of that is driven by the fact that the community is investing in itself,” he said. “And when you’re trying to recruit businesses, they like to see a robust investment in infrastructure, because transportation is critical and key.”

Read the report

You can find the full report at tripnet.org.