

Report: New Mexico motorists paying price for poor roads

Robert Nott, The Santa Fe New Mexican
Wednesday, January 26, 2022

Jan. 26 - A new national report on New Mexico roadways says "inadequate state and local funding" has led to poor conditions on more than a third of them.

It cites \$5.1 billion in unfunded needs, based on state and federal data.

"I believe our roads continue to crumble around us," said state Sen. Michael Padilla, D-Albuquerque, who participated in a virtual news conference Tuesday on the report released by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.

The roads must be upgraded and maintained, Padilla said, or the impact will be felt "for generations."

It's unclear whether state lawmakers will push for transportation project funds in the current legislative session. But Padilla believes the state could match infrastructure money available from the federal American Rescue Plan Act to address some of the problems.

Among the unfunded projects cited in the TRIP report are reconstruction of a six-lane corridor on Interstate 25 in the Las Cruces area; the design and construction of the Mesa del Sol interchange off I-25 in Albuquerque; and reconstruction on Cerrillos Road from St. Michael's Drive to St. Francis Drive.

Diane Delane Baros, a spokeswoman for the state Department of Transportation, wrote in an email Tuesday the department provided information for the TRIP report and "believes the analysis is fair."

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and state lawmakers allocated \$1.2 billion to the Department of Transportation over the past three years, "including \$142.5 million this last special session, to address these needs," Baros wrote. "Negotiations are underway during this session to see if any additional funding is available."

The TRIP report says rough roads in the state lead to increasing costs for drivers when it comes to vehicle wear and tear, as well as excessive gas use and wasted time spent in traffic jams.

In Albuquerque, that comes to \$928 a year for each driver, according to the report; in Santa Fe, the cost is estimated at \$817.

To calculate those figures, TRIP uses a vehicle operating cost metric called the Highway Development and Management Model, which factors in travel delay times, vehicle operating costs — including fuel — and a monetary value attached to the time spent navigating congested areas or work zones.

Rocky Moretti, director of research and policy for TRIP, said at the virtual news conference the nonprofit values the lost time at \$20 an hour.

"Most of us might actually put a much higher figure on that precious time," he said.

Moretti added TRIP, founded in 1971, is supported by organizations in the labor, construction, insurance, manufacturing and engineering industries.

TRIP's report says it is likely poor road conditions play a role in traffic fatalities, noting between 2015 and 2019, 1,894 people were killed in crashes in New Mexico.

Moretti said roadways play an important role in the state's economic well-being — about \$120 billion in goods are shipped to and from New Mexico every year.

But, he said, "Finding additional funding to work through this list of critically needed projects is a challenge."