

## Study: More money needed to improve roads and bridges, save lives

Ed Blazina - Pittsburgh Post-Gazette (TNS) |  
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PITTSBURGH — A national study has confirmed what Pennsylvania officials have been saying for months: The Biden administration's infrastructure plan is a nice boost but isn't nearly enough to address all of the nation's transportation needs.

The 10-page study, released last week by national transportation research nonprofit TRIP, said the new money would provide \$454 billion for road, bridge and transit improvements over the next five years. That's a boost of about 38% over the expected allotment for that period, but the report cited a study by the U.S. Department of Transportation last year that estimated the nation needed a 55% increase during that time frame to make significant improvements in road and bridge conditions, reduce traffic congestion and improve traffic safety.

"Additional spending provided by the (infrastructure bill) for highway, bridges and transit improvements are anticipated to have a significant benefit to the economy by stimulating additional output," the study said. "Despite the increase in transportation funding ... the nation's roads, bridges and transit systems remain significantly underfunded and will require increased investment for needed improvements and repairs."

The study stressed that improving conditions can provide more than just a better ride. They also can help to save lives.

Highway deaths have spiked during the pandemic, an unexpected consequence that experts believe has occurred because less traffic allowed drivers to push beyond the speed limit and engage in dangerous behavior such as impaired driving and not wearing seat belts. Experts say about a third of fatal crashes also are related to roads that could be made safer through better design and engineering, reducing fatalities and resulting in less serious injuries.

TRIP cited a 2017 report from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety that found a backlog of \$146 billion across the country in projects that would improve road safety. Implementing those improvements could save an estimated 63,700 lives and reduce the number of serious injuries by 350,000 over 20 years, AAA said.

In Pennsylvania, the study says the state should receive \$16.3 billion over five years in federal transportation

funds, a boost of about \$3.26 billion a year. State Transportation Secretary Yassmin Gramian has been saying the state spends about \$6.9 billion on transportation every year, about \$8.1 billion less than it should, so the additional federal funds don't even make up half of that shortfall.

Overall, the TRIP study paints a pretty grim picture of Pennsylvania's transportation system compared to the rest of the country. In six key categories — poor and mediocre pavement, poor and mediocre urban pavement, poor bridges, bridges older than 50 years, congested highways and age of shared transit vehicles — the state is higher than the national average in every area except congestion.

Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, said it will be important for states to find ways to generate additional revenue for transportation. The federal funding was approved by a narrow, partisan vote, indicating how tough it might be to secure more money.

Seeking additional transportation money certainly has been a hard sell in Pennsylvania.

One of PennDOT's first efforts, seeking tolls on nine major bridges to pay for their replacement, was met with dismay by people who live near the bridges and claim they shouldn't have to pay more than those in other areas. In the Pittsburgh area, municipalities near the Interstate 79 bridge in Bridgeville have filed suit against the tolling process, claiming the state didn't receive approval from the Legislature before pursuing tolls.

Last year, a bipartisan commission appointed by Gov. Tom Wolf recommended a series of steps to replace the state gasoline tax with a series of changes that include charging fees for package delivery and shared rides like Uber and Lyft; increasing fees for vehicle registration and car rental; and eventually switching to a tax based on vehicle miles driven. So far, none of those ideas has produced legislation that has received serious consideration.

Moretti stressed that building public support for additional spending takes time and a continuous effort.

"The public, when the people understand what's at stake, will generally support transportation improvements," Moretti said. "I think you really need that public support. It's an ongoing process of educating the public."