

Report: State and local funding needed for roads

By: [Janice Francis-Smith](#) | The Journal Record



A new report from Washington, D.C.-based TRIP finds Oklahoma ranks sixth in traffic fatalities, and that infrastructure improvements deferred cost Oklahomans billions of dollars every year. (Photo by Zetong Li via Unsplash)

Oklahoma ranks sixth in the nation for traffic fatalities, though the state ranks 29th in population, a tax base that may not be able to support necessary infrastructure improvements, according to a June 2021 report issued by national transportation research nonprofit TRIP.

The Washington, D.C.-based organization's report, entitled Keeping Oklahoma Moving Forward, focused solely on Oklahoma.

Oklahoma's current post-pandemic economic recovery is driving up maintenance costs faster than current funding levels will be able to keep up with in the long term, said Rocky Moretti, TRIP director of policy and research, during a press briefing on the report held Wednesday.

Despite record-level investment in Oklahoma's transportation infrastructure in recent years, current funding covers only 15% of the Oklahoma Department of Transportation's eight-year plan, the report shows.

ODOT maintains 32,751 miles of highway in the state, the 17th-largest highway system in the nation. TRIP's report shows that 90% of the roadway maintained by ODOT is in good condition. City and county roads and highways are falling behind, however.

"With population increasing during this period as well as gross domestic product, obviously that's very positive for Oklahoma," Moretti said. "Again, the recovery is putting additional stress on the system and that's going to increase the need for adequate funding at the state and local level."

"Every year, \$294 billion in goods are shipped to and from sites in Oklahoma, 72% by truck," reads the report. "The value of freight shipped to and from sites in Oklahoma, in inflation adjusted dollars, is expected to increase 61% by 2045 and by 61% for goods shipped by trucks."

Inadequate maintenance is not only a financial burden for the state's economy – the situation poses a real cost to individuals and families' household budgets.

"The average motorist in Oklahoma is paying an additional \$394 annually in the cost of driving on rough roads," Moretti said. "That's \$1 billion annually that consumers in Oklahoma are paying because of accelerated depreciation – the worse shape roads are in the more the vehicles are depreciating – but also additional routine repairs and additional fuel consumption and tire wear. Certainly additional fuel has an environmental aspect to that as well."

Data showed that evening rush-hour traffic in Oklahoma has returned to pre-pandemic levels, with March 2021 traffic 5% higher than that of March 2019. However, the morning commute is still less busy than it used to be, likely due to more employees in the metro continuing to work from home.

"For the average motorist in the Oklahoma City area, the cost of traffic congestion annually in delays and wasted fuel is \$842 annually, and the average motorist is spending an additional 50 hours annually stuck in traffic," Moretti said. In the Tulsa area, the average motorist is spending an additional \$732 in wasted fuel and 46 hours in traffic, he said.

Traffic fatalities on the state's rural roads, despite there being less traffic on those roads, are more than double the rate of other roads, the report shows. Approximately 3,200 people have been killed on Oklahoma roads over the last five years.

"Traffic crashes in Oklahoma imposed a total of \$3.3 billion in economic costs in 2019," the report reads. "According to a 2015 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration report, the economic costs of traffic crashes includes work and household productivity losses, property damage, medical costs, rehabilitation costs, legal and court costs, congestion costs and emergency services."

Investment in improvements in roadway safety features, such as shoulders on rural routes, intersection modifications and pavement improvements could help bring down fatalities.

"According to ODOT, more than 50% of the 9,500 miles of two-lane highways in the state lack sufficient shoulders," the report reads. "And, while the current Eight-Year Construction Plan will address roughly 804 miles, more than 4,000 miles of two-lane highways lack the funds needed for improvement."

Moretti encouraged Oklahomans to let their legislative leaders on the state and national level know that investment in transportation is important to them. Those with the power to fund transportation projects must know the impact the state's infrastructure has on the economy as a whole.

"Approximately 796,000 full-time jobs in Oklahoma in key industries like tourism, retail sales, agriculture and manufacturing are dependent on the quality, safety and reliability of the state's transportation infrastructure network," the report reads. "These workers earn \$33 billion in wages and contribute an estimated \$6 billion in state and local income, corporate and unemployment insurance taxes and the federal payroll tax."

"Local, regional and state economic performance is improved when a region's surface transportation system is expanded or repaired," the report reads. "This improvement comes as a result of the initial job creation and increased employment created over the long-term because of improved access, reduced transport costs and improved safety."

The good news is, the state of Oklahoma may win in the category of "most improved" when it comes to structurally deficient bridges, said Moretti.

"Since 2004, when an all-time high of 1,168 state-maintained bridges were rated structurally deficient (of a total of approximately 6,800 bridges), ODOT has reduced the number of structurally deficient state-maintained bridges each year, dropping to just 86 structurally deficient state-maintained bridges in at the end of 2019," the report reads.