

New Report Calls For Modernizing and Expanding Key Texas Highways

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Increasing traffic levels, a lack of connectivity between urban and rural areas, and a lack of adequate safety features are among the challenges faced on Texas' rural transportation system, according to a new report from TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. The TRIP report, "Keeping Rural Texas Connected," examines the safety, reliability and connectivity of the state's rural transportation system and evaluates its ability to provide reliable and safe mobility across the state and in several critical corridors.

Texas' economy is driven by energy production and extraction, manufacturing, agriculture, forestry and tourism – all of which require a safe, efficient and well-maintained transportation network. The state's strong economic growth and quality of life continue to attract new residents and businesses to the state. From 2000 to 2020, the state's population increased by 41%, and is expected to increase another 60% by 2050.

Texas' growth, if not accommodated with an improved and expanded transportation network of modern highways, could lead to decreased connectivity within rural areas and between rural and urban communities, impeding further economic growth. Providing safe and efficient access and mobility while supporting quality of life and economic productivity in Texas' small communities and rural areas will require implementing transportation policies that enhance safety and improve connectivity within rural areas and between rural and urban areas.

According to Texas Transportation Commissioner Alvin New, "TxDOT is dedicating more than \$12.2 billion to statewide connectivity projects to upgrade interstates and other major rural highways over the next ten years." Commissioner New added, "TxDOT is planning to invest an historic level of approximately \$14 billion in our rural areas over the next 10 years through our 2023 Unified Transportation Program (UTP). This represents a 600% increase in planned rural funding compared to planned funding from just seven years ago. It demonstrates TxDOT's commitment to building and maintaining a safe and efficient transportation system, not only in our most populous areas, but also in those rural areas that are so vital to our state's economic success."

To improve connectivity in the state, Texas has committed to a program to upgrade major corridors statewide to provide safe, reliable, efficient travel between economic activity centers while supporting the economic prosperity of all communities along the corridors and statewide. Since 2015, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) has completed 251 major improvements on the state's rural Texas Trunk System, at a cost of \$7.5 billion, and currently has 127 projects underway or planned, valued at \$7.2 billion. About half of the projects include expanded highway capacity. Despite this progress, TxDOT estimates that its current backlog to fund all needed improvements to the Texas Trunk System is \$27.8 billion.

TxDOT has identified four key rural corridors for expansion to four-lane divided highway capacity as being critical to meeting the state's need for safe and reliable rural connectivity:

- US 59 from Laredo to Houston: Planned expansion along this 253-mile major freight corridor will improve safety and connectivity between the Laredo border crossing and seaports on the Gulf Coast. This route will provide alternatives to Interstates 10 and 35 and will continue the development of I-69.
- US 87 / US 83 from the New Mexico border to I-10: This corridor, stretching from the New Mexico border to I-10, serves international freight movement, links agriculture, oil and gas producers with major markets, and provides connectivity to tourism areas. The route is part of the future I-27/Ports-to-Plains and I-14 systems.

- US 281 from I-20 to San Antonio: The planned expansion of this 205-mile corridor will improve traffic safety and address anticipated high growth and traffic congestion levels. This route will link north and central Texas communities and provide a truck diversion from I-35.

- US 69 / US 175 from Dallas to Beaumont: The modernization of this 239-mile segment will improve the safety and connectivity of the Port of Beaumont, improve economic opportunities for communities along this corridor, and enhance the state's hurricane evacuation routes. The US 69 and US 175 corridor is also part of the future I-14 system.

Of the 1,182 miles on the four key rural corridors, TxDOT has completed capacity expansions on 662 miles, has expansion underway on 32 miles, and has funding for expansion to an additional 114 miles. TxDOT estimates that the unfunded backlog to expand the remaining 374 miles – approximately one third of the four key state rural corridors segments in need of widening – is \$4.2 billion.

Last month the Texas Transportation Commission approved a Unified Transportation Program for 2023 to 2032 that includes \$14 billion for road, highway and bridge improvements in the state's rural districts – including approximately \$7 billion dollars for rural connectivity.

"It is imperative that we not only maintain our transportation infrastructure but continue to invest in new projects and improvements as we lead the nation in both our population growth and economic activity," said Drew Campbell, chairman of Transportation Advocates of Texas. "We are pleased to congratulate the Texas Department of Transportation on the recently approved Unified Transportation Plan which exemplifies the Commission's continued support of addressing the needs of all of Texas."

The operation of Texas' international and maritime ports and the state's border crossings, which are critical to the health of the state's economy, also rely heavily on the quality of the state's rural transportation system. In 2020, Texas' international border crossings supported 65% of U.S.-Mexico trade, worth \$352 billion. Texas' 11 deep-draft maritime ports move approximately 598 million tons of domestic and foreign cargo annually.

Additional safety improvements are needed on Texas' transportation network, particularly on rural roads, which are less likely to have adequate safety features, are more likely than urban roads to have only two lanes, and have often been constructed over a period of years. Traffic crashes on Texas' rural (non-Interstate) roads resulted in 1,334 fatalities in 2020. These rural roads have a significantly higher fatality rate than all other roads and highways in the state. While Texas' rural non-Interstate roads carried only 21% of all vehicle travel in the state, 34% of traffic fatalities occurred on these roads.

Many rural roads have been built with narrow lanes, limited shoulders, significant curves and steep slopes alongside roadways. Investments in rural traffic safety have been found to result in significant reductions in serious traffic crashes. A 2012 report by the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) found that improvements completed by TxDOT on 1,159 miles of rural state roadways that widened lanes, improved shoulders and made other safety improvements resulted in 133 fewer fatalities on these roads in the first three years after the improvements were completed (as compared to the three years prior). TTI estimates that the improvements on these roads are likely to save 880 lives over 20 years.

"Providing Texas with a transportation network that will support further economic growth and maintain quality of life will require the state to continue to invest in a rural transportation system that is safe and reliable and that provides adequate mobility and connectivity between cities of all sizes and among rural areas," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director.