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Now that Texas' rural roads are a threat to the economy, will the state do something?

Dug Begley, Staff writer | Sep. 15, 2022



Road construction continues along FM 1488 at Authors Drive on Aug. 8, 2022, in Magnolia. A new report has found rural roads are increasingly unable to meet traffic demands.

Yi-Chin Lee / Staff photographer

Texas' rural roads remain strained, lacking capacity and safety that if left unresolved could pose risks to drivers and the state economy, according to a study released Wednesday.

"The system continues to need to be expanded and improved," said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, the Washington, D.C. nonprofit behind the report.

In "[Keeping Rural Texas Connected](#)," researchers found that 251 projects to improve highways outside metro and suburban areas were completed since 2015, at a cost of \$7.5 billion, and another 127 valued at \$7.2 billion are under construction according to the Texas Department of Transportation.

Nonetheless, state highway officials have a backlog of \$27.8 billion in maintenance and projects along the Texas Trunk System, the 30-year-old goal state officials set to make sure every area of Texas with a population of more than 20,000 is connected by a safe, four-lane divided road.

"It shows there is a very strong need for more shoulders, wider roads and divided two-lane roads," Texas Transportation Commissioner Alvin New said.

One of the challenges to garnering support for rural roads, he added, is that Texas is becoming more urban, but much of its transportation needs remain decidedly rural.

"This is not something we should be thinking of as either-or," New said, noting the value of getting rural crops and deliveries to major metro areas. "It is not just where you live, but everyone benefits from investment in rural Texas."

TRIP often advocates for greater highway investment and improved maintenance of existing roadways, particularly highways deemed crucial for commerce. The nonprofit receives financial support from insurance companies, equipment manufacturers and businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction.

Researchers said while \$14 billion in projects are planned for rural Texas highways over the next decade, [part of \\$85 billion recently approved by the Texas Transportation Commission](#), the huge demand for maintained highways, wider shoulders and additional lanes faces significant headwinds, including higher construction costs. Based on the state's construction cost index, updated monthly, average costs were 22.5 percent higher last month compared to August 2021.

As a result, the added money is expected to build even less, at a time when thousands of miles of Texas highways are the lifeline for drivers and businesses.

In the report, researchers identified four major routes where investment is critical to link rural road needs with access to the more established interstate system that crisscrosses Texas:

- U.S. 59 from Laredo to where it becomes Interstate 69 in Houston, a distance of 253 miles
- U.S. 281 from Interstate 20 near Fort Worth to San Antonio, a distance of 205 miles
- U.S. 69 / U.S. 175 from Dallas to Beaumont, a distance of 239 miles
- U.S. 87 / U.S. 83 from the New Mexico border to Interstate 10, a distance of 485 miles

All four are major truck routes, with cargo expected to increase over the next 25 years. The Laredo border crossing, a hotbed of trucking activity, is expected to jump from about 17,000 trucks daily — in both directions — to 24,300 by 2030, and to 44,300 by 2050.



A view of traffic exiting Mexico at the World Trade Bridge, Saturday, Oct. 24, 2020.

Truckers crossing the bridge lead to heavy use of U.S. 59 between Laredo and Houston.

Danny Zaragoza, Staff Photographer / Laredo Morning Times

As roads are repaired, Moretti and New said during a media briefing Wednesday, they also address a growing safety crisis on Texas roadways. Despite carrying about 21 percent of the state's daily miles driven, roads in rural areas represent 34 percent of all highway deaths. Though down from where rural deaths were 20 years ago, that is because more of Texas has become urban, New said. He said the trunk system in particular needs additional investment if the state can achieve its goals of cutting roadway deaths in half by 2035.

"If we can get roads built to all of these communities of some size with divided four-lane highways, we can make it safer," New said. Safety advocates argue Texas highway officials must combat one of the most common reasons for severe crashes — excessive speed. As roads are rebuilt and widened, care needs to be made to not enable faster trips that actually increase risk, they say.

"When we simply look at the rate of crashes, TxDOT facilities appear safer than local streets," Jay Crossley, executive director of Austin-based nonprofit Farm & City, told the Texas House Transportation Committee on Sept. 7. "However, if we instead focus on severe crashes, we find that TxDOT facilities are more dangerous than local streets. This most likely can be explained by speed. In rural, suburban, and urban Texas, the facilities designed for the highest speeds are our state on-system roadways, where there are terrible results of someone driving 70 miles an hour every day."

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