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More rural Texas transportation updates are needed, report says

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Highway 90 in Pecos County, Texas.

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AUSTIN — Texas rural communities face several transportation challenges that could impact economic growth in the state, according to a report released Wednesday by TRIP, a transportation research nonprofit.

The report found that even as Texas continues to make significant improvements in its rural transportation system, the state's growing population, increased energy and agricultural production and additional economic activities place a greater need on expanded and improved transportation in the state's rural communities.

"Growing economic activity in urban and rural communities, if not accommodated with improved and expanded transportation facilities, particularly a network of modern highways, can result in a lack of adequate connectivity within rural areas and between rural and urban communities, which can impede a region's potential for economic growth," the report said.

An estimated 1,100 people are moving to Texas every day, according to most recent reports. Additionally, 3.5 billion tons of freight, valued at \$3.3 trillion dollars, are shipped to and from sites in Texas each year, most of which is carried by trucks. By 2050, freight movement in Texas is expected to increase by 40% by weight.

This, experts say, is placing an overwhelming burden on transportation systems statewide not only in traffic but in the wear-and-tear of roadways. This is particularly concerning in rural parts of the state where there is often a single highway between areas and many of those highways only offer single-lane roads.

Improving rural connectivity will not only help with those issues but allow for critical items such as food, fuel and supplies to reach growing populations, the report said.

"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, in a statement.

An increase in traffic also brings greater safety concerns, the report pointed out.

About half of Texas' fatal roadway accidents occur in rural Texas, which makes up about 15% of the state's population.

"It shows that there's a very strong need for more shoulders, wider roads and ultimately divided four lane roads because that's the safest way to move products and people from one place to the other," Texas Transportation Commissioner Alvin New said.

The Texas Department of Transportation has already identified four key rural corridors for expansion to four-lane divided highways, adding that doing so is critical to meeting the state's need for safe and reliable rural connectivity. Those connectivities include US 59 from Laredo to Houston, US 87/US 83 from the New Mexico border to Interstate 10, US 281 from Interstate 20 to San Antonio, and US 69/US 175 from Dallas to Beaumont, totaling 1,182 miles of roadway, the report said.

TxDOT has since completed capacity expansions on 662 miles, has expansion underway on 32 miles, and has funding for expansion to an additional 114 miles. But the capacity expansions for the remaining 374 miles remain unfunded with TxDOT estimating that it will need \$4.2 billion to complete the backlog.

The federal Infrastructure Bill passed last year will provide Texas with about \$1 billion a year over the next five years. Additionally, the Texas Transportation Commission adopted its Unified Transportation Program in August, which dedicates \$14 billion for road, highway and bridge improvements in state's rural districts, including \$6.9 billion for rural connectivity, over the next 10 years.

Even so, addressing the state's rural transportation challenges will require additional funding, the report said, particularly as inflation is adding unexpected costs. According to TxDOT's July 2022 Highway Cost Index Report, the cost of highway construction increased by 27% from July 2021 to July 2022.

The report said providing a rural transportation network that supports further economic growth and maintains quality of life will require Texas to continue to invest in a rural transportation system that is safe and reliable.

"It's not just where you live, but everyone in the state of Texas benefits from investments in rural Texas," New said.