



A tough road to hoe: New report highlights challenges for Montana roadways



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Interstate sign in Billings

By: [Kelsey Merison](#)

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BILLINGS — Montana's aging roads and bridges are failing to keep up with population booms around the state—and the fix won't be cheap. That's the takeaway from a new report released Wednesday identifying the challenges Montana's

transportation system faces.

The report, published by the National Transportation Research Nonprofit, is titled "[Keep Moving Montana Forward: Progress and Challenges in Achieving a 21st Century Transportation System](#)". On Wednesday, a press conference on Zoom was held with the director of policy and research for the group, Rocky Moretti. Moretti was joined by the president of the Montana Infrastructure Coalition, David Smith, and the director of the Montana Department of Transportation, Mack Long.

"The report points out that Montana continues to experience significant growth," Moretti said. "In population, economic growth, and also vehicle travel growth."

But maintaining those transportation systems requires a lot of planning—and with the growing population—things become tricky.

"Montana's population since 2000 has increased by 22%, and between 2000-2019 vehicle travel increased by 30%," Moretti said.

"We saw a significant dip in travel during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, but by 2021, vehicle travel in Montana was 7% higher than pre-COVID in 2019. Travel is back in Montana and at a higher rate than what we saw before COVID."

But recent acts passed are providing monetary relief.

"In 2017, the Legislature in Montana passed the Road Safety Accountability Act, which increased funding for transportation by about \$40 million a year with about two-thirds of that funding going to local governments and the other one-third to state governments to make needed road, bridge, and highway improvements across the state," Moretti said. "This additional money at the state level then was enhanced by additional funding from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act that passed in 2021, which boosted federal funding coming to Montana for surface protection by approximately one-third."

Smith said that funding is helpful but doesn't cover everything.

"Montana's in a lucky position that the federal government provides about 85-87% of the funding that's used by the (Department of Transportation)," Smith said on Wednesday. "But that still means that we have to come up with 13-15% on our own."

And that 13 to 15 percent cost adds a lot of pressure on the transportation system.

"Along the way, there's been so much pressure with the population and the vehicle counts growing too. We're very nervous about what's ahead, and we want to make sure we have a good plan for that," Smith said. "At the end of the day, we have some pretty big issues to solve."

Luckily, many are involved in solving those problems, according to Long.

"We can't do it in a vacuum. We can't do what we do alone," Long said on Wednesday. "We have a big role in making sure we take care of as much as we can, working with everyone we can."

And Long agrees these problems are on the rise along with the population.

"Our whole goal is to make sure the roads are safe and maintained well, and we keep addressing the issues that are in front of us," Long said. "We are unique as a state. We are the fourth-largest state in the nation. We have thousands of miles of road that cover a very vast area, Montana."

And with so much road to cover, upgrades often take longer.

"The report found that 13% of major roadways in the state have pavement in poor condition, and another 17% are in mediocre condition," Moretti said. "In the Billings area, the report found that 32% of major roadways are rated in poor condition, and 21% are rated in mediocre condition."

And driving on rough roads is not easy on a vehicle.

"Driving on rough roads increases costs to motorists in terms of maintaining their vehicle. We estimate that the average driver is spending an additional \$526 annually driving on rough roads in the state, a total of \$427 million," Moretti said.

And it's not just roads that are suffering.

"Seven percent of Montana's bridges are rated in poor condition," Moretti said.

"There are 2,000 off-system bridges. Those are farm-to-market type roads," Smith said. "Our agricultural suppliers are trying to get across those small bridges. And because they are now load-posted and can't handle more weight, we've got a lot of inventory that has to be dealt with in the form of 70 or 80-year-old bridges in the form of wood timber."

And in Billings—some projects are already underway for upgrades. Like the [Billings Bypass Project](#).

Some segments [of the project](#) are already complete, according to Lisa Olmstead from Billings-based DOWL Engineering, a contractor with Montana DOT. It will be a few years before the entire project is complete. Olmstead told MTN News on Wednesday that alternate routes will open as the project progresses, so access around town will continue.

She added that while construction of the Yellowstone River bridge is complete, it's not yet open to the public.

All the experts on the call agreed Montana's transportation system is crucial for our economy.

"The design and construction of the state's transportation system is supporting approximately 8,000 full-time jobs a year, and over 200,000 jobs in critical sectors of the Montana economy, including tourism, manufacturing, and agriculture," Moretti said. "They critically rely on the quality of our transportation system."

To learn more about the report, please [click here](#).

"Ensuring that Montana continues to grow is going to require that the state and local governments are able to provide well-maintained, efficient, and safe transportation systems," Moretti said. "Some real evaluation of how to have a funding system that's sustainable is critical."-