

Report urges support for road and bridge infrastructure projects in Montana

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A construction flagger halts traffic on U.S. Highway 12 in Townsend in 2021 as crews work on a road upgrade project. THOM BRIDGE, Independent Record

Montana faces big challenges on many of its critical transportation routes, including road and bridge deterioration, improving transit safety and handling more volume to support economic development, according to a report released Wednesday by a nonprofit group.

The ["Keep Moving Montana Forward"](#) report by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based group founded in 1971, calls on the state to provide a well-kept, safe and efficient 21st century network of roads and bridges to support its residents and economic growth. It also says the state of Montana will need to invest more in its transportation system.

The state's population, which as of July 1 was estimated at 1,122,867, has increased by 22% since 2000 and vehicle travel has increased 30% from 2000 to 2019, Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, said during a [news conference](#).

The study notes that nearly 214,000 full-time jobs in Montana in businesses such as tourism, retail, agriculture and manufacturing rely on a reliable and safe transportation safety network.

These workers earn about \$7.3 billion in wages and contribute \$1.3 billion in taxes.

The report includes a list of the state's top 20 "transportation challenges." Joining in on a Zoom conference call Wednesday hosted by

TRIP were Malcolm "Mack" Long, Montana Department of Transportation director, and David Smith, president of the Montana Infrastructure Coalition, a nonpartisan group that seeks funding solutions for infrastructure needs.

RANK	ROUTE	LOCATION	NEEDED IMPROVEMENT
1	Load Posted Bridges	Statewide	Bridge replacement or rehabilitation to address deterioration and aging
2	US 191	Four Corners to Beaver Creek	Capacity expansion and improvements
3	Culvert Replacement	Statewide	Culverts across the state need replacement due to poor condition
4	I-90	Billings	Capacity expansion, new interchanges
5	I-90	St. Regis to Missoula	Pavement rehabilitation and preservation, bridge replacement and deck treatments
6	I-90	Hardin to Wyoming	Pavement rehabilitation and preservation, bridge replacement and deck treatments
7	I-90	Idaho to St. Regis	Pavement rehabilitation, preservation and reconstruction
8	I-15	Great Falls to Sweetgrass	Bridge replacements, interchange capacity expansion and roadway improvement
9	I-94	Miles City to North Dakota	Pavement rehabilitation and preservation, bridge replacement and deck treatments
10	I-90	Bozeman	Capacity improvements to address seasonal congestion
11	I-15	Helena to Great Falls	Interchange capacity and roadway deterioration, bridge replacement and deck treatments
12	US 89	Livingston to Gardner	Capacity improvements to address seasonal congestion
13	US 2	Kalispel to East Glacier	Pavement rehabilitation, bridge replacements
14	MT 287	Virginia City to Sheridan	Major capital improvements needed to bring roadway to current design standards
15	Billings Bypass	Billings	Additional bypass segments need to be completed
16	US 93	Idaho to Florence	Pavement rehabilitation and reconstruction, bridge replacement
17	MT 7		Reconstruction projects to bring roadway to current design standards
18	US 12	Lewis & Clark County	Capacity improvement and pavement rehabilitation
19	US 191	Mobridge	Due to re-occurring landslides, one segment of this road is a gravel surface, three areas need reconstruction
20	US 87	Armington Jct. to Raynesford	Improvements to enhance capacity, reduce hazards and address deterioration

The chart below details pavement conditions on major roads in the state's largest urban areas and the extra vehicle operating costs associated with driving on rough roads.

Location	Poor	Mediocre	Fair	Good	VOC
Billings	32%	21%	13%	33%	\$743
Great Falls	31%	23%	10%	36%	\$731
Missoula	29%	20%	9%	42%	\$678
MONTANA STATEWIDE	13%	17%	16%	54%	\$526

Topping the state list of projects is the replacement or repair of deteriorating and aging bridges.

The study noted, based on information provided by the Federal Highway Administration based on state data, that 30% of Montana's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition. It said 13% of the major local and state maintained roads are in

poor condition and 17% are in mediocre condition.

It said these poor conditions cost the average driver \$526 per year in annual vehicle operating costs, or \$427 million per year statewide.

The study offered a look at three locations. It stated that 32% of the pavement conditions on major roads in Billings are rated poor and 21% are mediocre. In Missoula, 29% of the major roads are poor and 20% are mediocre. In Great Falls, 31% are poor and 23% are mediocre.

The report also found that 7% of the state's bridges are in poor/structurally deficient condition, 62% are in fair condition and 31% are in good condition.

It calls for Interstate 90 pavement repair in Billings, Bozeman, St. Regis to Missoula, and Hardin to Wyoming. It also notes that additional bypass segments need to be completed in Billings.

The report notes that Interstate 15 between Helena and Great Falls is in need of increased capacity, roadway repairs, bridge repairs and deck treatments.

It also says U.S. Route 12 in Lewis and Clark County needs pavement repairs and to increase capacity.

Moretti said a well-maintained transportation system was necessary for Montana to continue to grow.

Moretti noted the Montana Legislature passed the Bridge Road Safety and Accountability Act in 2017, which increased funding for transportation by about \$40 million a year. He said two-thirds of that funding went to local governments and the rest is going to the state for road, bridge and highway improvements.

The Bridge and Road Safety Accountability Act of 2017, or House Bill 473, was championed by the Montana Infrastructure Coalition.

Moretti said the federal infrastructure and jobs act passed in late 2021 added more funds.

He said the additional money was critical in helping the state move forward with projects, such as road repair needed after flooding in southwest and south-central Montana.

Long said his department likes what TRIP does.

"Our whole goal is to make sure the roads are safe and maintained well ..." he said, adding Montana is the fourth-largest state in the nation.

"We have thousands of miles of road that cover a very vast area," Long said.

He said Montana is seeing a lot of growth, mainly in the western part of the state but other parts as well.

Smith said the increasing population and higher vehicle counts have raised concerns.

"We are very nervous about what is ahead and we want to make sure we have a good plan for that," he said.

The federal government provides about 85% of the funding used by MDT, but that means Montana has to come up with the remainder on its own.

Smith said MDT providing a long range strategic plan has allowed opportunities for more grants to come in.

"By having a plan ready to go we are able to capitalize when another state doesn't use its funding," he said, noting that \$119 million came to Montana last year that way.

"At the end of the day we got some big pretty issues to solve," Smith said, adding there are 2,000 off-system bridges, which are bridges not on the federal highway system.

He said the bridges cannot handle more weight. There is a lot of inventory that needs to be dealt with in the form of 80-year-old wooden bridges.

"This is a forward-looking document to address this and points where needs are," Smith said.



Malcolm "Mack" Long, director, Montana Department of Transportation MDOT

Chart 4. Bridge conditions statewide and in Montana's largest urban areas.

	POOR/STRUCTURALLY DEFICIENT		FAIR		GOOD		TOTAL BRIDGES
	Number	Share	Number	Share	Number	Share	
Billings	2	1%	212	74%	70	24%	288
Great Falls	7	4%	105	56%	75	40%	187
Missoula	17	8%	112	54%	77	37%	206
MONTANA STATEWIDE	367	7%	3,287	62%	1,624	31%	5,278

Source: TRIP analysis of Federal Highway Administration National Bridge Inventory (2022).

The report noted that 7% of the state's bridges are rated poor/structurally deficient, 62% are rated fair and 31% are rated good.

It said most bridges are designed to last 50 years before getting a major overhaul. In Montana, 41% of the state's bridges are 50 years old or older.

The study also touched on traffic safety, noting that 1,008 people were killed in traffic crashes from 2017-2021. It said improving safety can be achieved through more improvements in vehicle safety, driver, pedestrian and bicyclist behavior, and improvements to roadway safety features.

It said that traffic crashes in Montana caused \$1.2 billion in economic costs in 2020. This includes work and household productivity losses, property damages, medical costs, legal costs and emergency services.

Moretti said TRIP has produced nearly 600 reports on national and state transportation systems in its more than 50-year history.

TRIP states it is sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, labor unions, transportation advocates and businesses involved in transit engineering and construction.

To read the report, go to <https://bit.ly/3XH4zkc>.

Watch the news conference on Zoom at <https://bit.ly/3WgvWAd>.