



Growth in travel prompts goals for safer roadways

by Michael Santoscoy | Friday, January 20th 2023



To keep up with the growth in Montana, state and local governments say they need to provide a well maintained, efficient and safe transportation system. (Photo: NBC Montana)

BOZEMAN, Mont. — Transportation experts say the Treasure State experienced growth in population, economics and vehicle travel in 2022.

Montana's population is now 22% higher than it was 20 years ago. In that same timeframe, vehicle travel increased 30%.

While travel dipped during the early stages of the pandemic, experts say travel in Montana is now higher than before.

To keep up with the growth, state and local governments say they need to provide a well maintained, efficient and safe transportation system.

“The challenge, of course, is that

people are moving to Montana because of the high quality of life. And you need to make sure that you're providing the infrastructure to maintain that high quality of life. And that certainly includes safety,” said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.

Safety is on the radar for Moretti and other transportation experts as Montana traffic fatalities also climb.

From 2017 to 2021, there were 1,008 traffic fatalities in the state, around 200 traffic deaths a year.

In 2021, the total fatalities jumped to 243 deaths, a 32% increase over 2019.

Montana traffic fatalities ranked the fifth highest in the country in 2021, based on 100 million miles of total travel.

Moretti said it's unacceptable, and transportation safety officials are taking a broad, holistic approach toward improving traffic safety.

“It's going to require that better driver behavior, less speeding; certainly, that part falls on the drivers, but there's certainly education and enforcement part to that,” said Moretti.

Officials say the overall goal is to have safer drivers, roads, vehicles, speeds and post-crash care.

Moretti believes Montana is a desirable place to live and visit, but it's important to put people's safety first to ensure the state's ongoing growth.

“It's absolutely vital that the state is working with all of its transportation and police agencies and health care agencies. And ultimately, with the consent of the public to create an environment where we see fatalities dropping from averaging over 200 year, dropping eventually to zero,” said Moretti.