

## TRIP report finds Charlotte businesses, residents bear brunt of NC road problems



Traffic is seen along I-485 in southeast Charlotte. MELISSA KEY



By [Erik Spanberg](#) – Managing Editor, Charlotte Business Journal

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Charlotte drivers spend more than a full work week each year stuck in traffic, and the combined cost of congestion and poorly maintained roads add up to nearly \$2,000 per year for the average motorist here – by far the highest amounts in North Carolina.

Local drivers lose an average of 47 hours annually because of traffic, costing them \$1,342 each in lost time and fuel. In addition, Charlotte drivers endure traveling on the worst roads in North Carolina, with 44% of area roads deemed to be in poor or mediocre condition, compared with 33% statewide.

Additional fuel, repairs, maintenance and tire wear caused by the poorly maintained roads cost each driver an average of \$559 per year. The state average is \$484.

Those are among the findings [in a new state report by TRIP](#), a Washington, D.C.-based transportation research nonprofit. TRIP assesses roads, bridges, and travel conditions for 10 to 15 states annually.

The last North Carolina report was done in 2020, according to TRIP. “With North Carolina continuing to experience significant growth and vehicle travel in the state returning to pre-Covid-19 levels, North Carolina faces a significant challenge in providing reliable, safe, and well-maintained transportation system,” Rocky Moretti, TRIP’s director of policy and research, said during a virtual media briefing yesterday.

The report’s analysis and conclusions are based on a combination of federal and state government statistics. The report makes note of recent increases in funding through [the Biden administration’s 2021 infrastructure law](#) as well as the state legislature’s decision last year to steer more general sales tax revenue to highway funding over the next decade.

North Carolina will receive an additional [\\$7.8 billion over five years for highways and bridges](#) from the federal infrastructure act. The legislature’s sales tax shift adds up to a combined \$7.2 billion more for highways through 2033.

Despite those gains, the report makes clear that the state and its major metropolitan areas continue to be plagued by aging roads, highways and bridges that are slowing business and frustrating

residents. And more fiscal challenges await as improving fuel efficiency reduces gas tax revenue, along with the shift to electric vehicles.

The N.C. Department of Transportation spent \$656 million in 2022 on road and highway maintenance, but that still fell short by \$341 million of the department’s recommended spending. Similarly, state maintenance spending on bridges last year was \$371 million, \$39 million less than the department’s recommendation of \$410 million.

The report offers analysis of statewide conditions as well as in five metro areas: Charlotte, the Triangle, the Triad, Asheville and Wilmington.

North Carolina overall loses \$4 billion annually from traffic snarls due to lost time and wasted fuel. The Triangle has the second-worst congestion costs behind Charlotte: 36 hours per driver and \$897 in lost time and wasted fuel.

In combined expenses – traffic congestion plus poor roads – Charlotte drivers lose an average of \$1,901 per year, well ahead of the Triangle (\$1,374), Wilmington (\$1,190), Asheville (\$1,077) and the Triad (\$1,057).

Charlotte fares better on maintaining bridges. The area’s 1,810 bridges include 94, or 5%, that are structurally deficient, below the state’s 7% rate. Another 947 are in fair condition, equal to 52%, the same percentage as North Carolina. And 769 bridges, or 42% are considered in good condition, just above the state’s 41%.

No area of the states fares worse for traffic and freight congestion than Charlotte. The report lists the 15 least reliable highway segments in North Carolina, ranked by the widest variability in travel times. Seven of the 15 are in Mecklenburg County; no other county has more than two.

For tucking-freight highway delays, the Charlotte region accounts for seven of the 10 worst bottlenecks across the state.

“The Charlotte Regional Business Alliance is actively advocating at the North Carolina General Assembly for modernizing the transportation funding structure to improve our quality of life and meet the demands of a growing region in an increasingly competitive business environment,” said Joe Bost, the alliance’s chief advocacy officer.

Bost added that CLT Alliance has convened business leaders and state lawmakers for conversations “highlighting the needs of our region and why we should act now.” The business community is unified on transportation issues, he said.

North Carolina Chamber CEO Gary Salamido participated in the TRIP report media briefing, pointing out the transportation infrastructure investment has helped the state’s economy add jobs and investments for decades.

Last year, CNBC ranked North Carolina as the best state in the nation for doing business.

Salamido warned that such accolades can be fleeting.

“We commend our state leaders for what they’ve done” to increase investments in infrastructure, he added. “But leading takes additional courage.”

The assessment comes at the same time the Charlotte Area Transit System is embroiled in controversy over lapsed maintenance and other problems – and as a proposed \$13.5 billion expansion plan is stuck in neutral after years of advocacy by local leaders.