

## Local drivers lose 26 hours a year due to congestion, spend \$600 on wasted fuel, report says



By [Shea Carver](#) | April 19, 2023

*A new transportation report notes conditions*



*of roads, highways and bridges statewide, including 46% of major roads in Wilmington rated mediocre or fair, caused by a combination of traffic, moisture and climate. The remaining equal 16% in poor condition and 37% in good condition. (Port City Daily/File)*

A recent report conducted on North Carolina's transportation infrastructure shows the state's roadways and bridges need improvements to keep up with growth, while the state transportation department needs more long-term funding to stay apace. Wilmington's ratings fall below the state average and cost taxpayers even more.

This is according to the latest TRIP [report](#) released Wednesday. The National Transportation Research Nonprofit studied conditions of roads, highways and bridges across the state to assess safety and congestion, as well as funding needed to improve infrastructure. It utilized data provided by the North Carolina Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration and the U.S. Department of Transportation.

The report showcased that North Carolina's vehicle travel is among the fifth-highest countrywide, as the population has grown to 10.7 million, a 33% increase from 2000 to 2022. Motorists have increased by 37% in that time frame, despite experiencing a dip due to Covid-19 in 2020; it has since picked back up to pre-pandemic levels.

But maintaining transportation infrastructure hasn't kept pace with the increased drive time and drivers. For example, in 2022 TRIP's report showed NCDOT put \$656 million toward roads and highway improvements, but fell \$341 million short of the \$997 investment recommended.

For bridges, it had a suggested spending of \$410 million but was \$37 million underfunded. NCDOT wouldn't answer Port City Daily's request as to what caused the shortfalls; TRIP credits some of it to inflation and increased construction materials and labor costs.

"While NCDOT does not typically comment on reports prepared outside of the department, we appreciate any discussions on ways to fund the

future of transportation in North Carolina," NCDOT spokesperson Lauren Haviland wrote to Port City Daily. "NCDOT will continue to work with our partners to deliver safe and reliable transportation options for all who travel in our state."

More funding is coming down the pipe to make up for lost investments. The state's gas tax has been decreasing, due to inflation and increased fuel-efficient vehicles and electric cars. As such, the passing of [North Carolina House Bill 103](#) last year allows for the state's sales tax to put money toward road and bridge expenditures, roughly \$7 billion in the next decade.

"This followed the 2021 passage of the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which increased federal highway, bridge and transit funding in North Carolina by approximately 25%," the report indicates. Deteriorating infrastructures come at a price for taxpayers, specifically \$484 annually per North Carolina driver. The state average from TRIP shows 10% of roads are in poor condition, with 23% rated both mediocre and fair, and the remaining 44% as good.

TRIP assessed in Wilmington 46% of major roads in the area are rated mediocre or fair, caused by a combination of traffic, moisture and climate. The remaining equal 16% in poor condition and 37% in good condition.

"Major roadways, in terms of a bureaucratic terminology, [is] what the Federal Highway Administration would call an 'arterial roadway,'" Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research, said in the press briefing. "Essentially, a way to look at those are the major grid patterns of the region. A roadway that has traffic lights is quite likely going to be an arterial."

The city of Wilmington oversees 400 miles of roadways, with the rest owned privately or by NCDOT.

Local taxpayers fork over around \$544 annually in extra vehicle operating expenses, due to driving over roads marred by potholes, rough surfaces and rutting. Repair costs, increased fuel consumption and wear-and-tear on tires all add to the \$3.7 billion spent statewide, TRIP reports.

And this number doesn't include time and wasted fuel due to congestion, with drivers having to wait in traffic.

"The average Wilmington driver loses 26 hours to congestion each year and \$646 in lost time and wasted fuel due to congestion," the report indicates.

The report also tracks some of the worst highway segments in the state, which includes northbound Highway 421 in Wilmington in the top 10. A poorly constructed highway hampers economic development, according to TRIP. North Carolina's economy brings in \$795 million of valued freight annually.

"By 2045, it's anticipated that the value of freight moved in the state to and from sites in North Carolina will increase by 67%," Moretti said Wednesday.

Since 2018, NCDOT invested more than \$4 billion to improve the roadways statewide where heavy freight is transported, including increasing capacity. \$202 million was spent on the Wilmington Bypass, which runs from US-74/76 to Cedar Hill Road to west of US-421. TRIP also researched more than 18,000 bridges statewide, 41% it maintains are in good condition. The remaining 7% are degrading poorly and 52% moderately. This takes into account having to replace bridge decks and other components. Roughly 30% of bridges are 50 years or older.

One in Wilmington reaching its end-of-lifespan is the Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, which has been the hot topic of local leaders for years now. No funding source has been put toward its replacement, which is expected to run anywhere between \$300 million and \$900 million.

[NCDOT identified in October \\$2 million](#) from the State Highway Bridge Fund to cover the cost of traffic and revenue studies, underway now.

Only three bridges are listed in Wilmington in poor condition with 42 ranking fair; the report doesn't list them explicitly. Seventy hold a good ranking.

"We are a county surrounded by bodies of water, which requires bridges to keep us connected to the mainland, all of which require regular maintenance and upkeep," Natalie Haskins English, CEO of the Wilmington Chamber of Commerce, is quoted in the report.

"The Cape Fear Memorial Bridge, which is beyond its 50-year lifespan, is a critical connection to the NC State Ports at Wilmington, to the workforce that commutes into Wilmington, and to the visitors that fuel our tourism economy. A replacement is our top infrastructure priority and is not included in the current State Transportation Improvement Program. We must identify additional funding to make it a reality."

Part of the reason the TRIP report is conducted is to assess roadway safety across the state. It shows traffic fatalities have increased from 2019 to 2021 by 18%, going from 1,373 to 1,627. The researchers for TRIP noted drivers during the pandemic exhibited riskier behaviors behind the wheel.

"The US Department of Transportation, working with state transportation departments, have put together a comprehensive national roadway safety strategy that is going to be critical in bringing these really terrible numbers lower," Moretti said in the press briefing. "And that safe systems approach is going to take all of the transportation and related agencies across the state of North Carolina working together toward ensuring that we have safer drivers at a safer speed and improved roadway safety features."