

Wisconsin Addressing Traffic Congestion, Safety, Road and Bridge Challenges

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State and federal transportation funding increases have allowed Wisconsin to move forward with projects to improve the condition, reliability and safety of the state's transportation system.

Despite these funding increases, Wisconsin still faces challenges in improving and maintaining its transportation system to improve traffic safety, relieve traffic congestion and improve road and bridge conditions.

Roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost Wisconsin motorists a total of \$7.6 billion statewide annually – up to \$2,473 per driver in some areas – due to higher vehicle operating costs, traffic crashes and congestion-related delays.

Increased investment in transportation improvements at the local, state and federal levels could relieve traffic congestion, improve road, bridge and transit conditions, boost safety, and support long-term economic growth in Wisconsin, according to a new report released today by TRIP, a Washington, DC based national transportation research nonprofit. The TRIP report, "Keeping Wisconsin Mobile: Providing a Modern, Sustainable Transportation System in the Badger State," finds that throughout Wisconsin, nearly half of major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor or mediocre condition, seven of locally and state-maintained bridges (20 ft. or more in length) are rated poor/structurally deficient, and 2,967 people lost their lives on the state's roads from 2018-2022.

Wisconsin's major urban roads are congested, causing significant delays and choking commuting and commerce. The TRIP report includes statewide and regional pavement and bridge conditions, congestion data, highway safety data, and cost breakdowns for the Eau Claire, Green Bay-Appleton-Oshkosh, Kenosha, Madison, Milwaukee and Wausau areas. Driving on Wisconsin roads costs the state's drivers a total of \$7.6 billion annually – up to \$2,473 per driver in some areas – in the form of extra vehicle operating costs (VOC) as a result of driving on roads in need of repair, lost time and fuel due to congestion-related delays, and the costs of traffic crashes in which the lack of adequate roadway safety features, while not the primary factor, likely were a contributing factor. A breakdown of the costs per motorist in the state's largest urban areas, along with a statewide total, is below.

The TRIP report finds that 25% of Wisconsin's major roads are in poor condition and 20% are in mediocre condition. Driving on deteriorated roads costs the average Wisconsin motorist an additional \$733 each year – a total of \$3.1 billion statewide- in extra vehicle operating costs, including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear.

Seven percent (943 of 14,412) of Wisconsin's bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition. Bridges that are rated poor/structurally

deficient have significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. Forty-two of the state's bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 51% are in good condition.

Most bridges are designed to last 50 years before major overhaul or replacement, although many newer bridges are being designed to last 75 years or longer. In Wisconsin, 29% of the state's bridges are 50 years or older.

"Poorly maintained roadways act as a hidden tax for the motorists who rely on them," said Nick Jarmusz, director of public affairs for AAA – The Auto Club Group. "This extra burden compounds the other many costs of vehicle ownership, which have dramatically risen in the last few years." Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, vehicle travel in Wisconsin dropped by as much as 36% in April 2020 compared to vehicle travel during the same month the previous year. By 2022, vehicle miles of travel (VMT) in Wisconsin had rebounded to 3% below pre-pandemic levels in 2019.

During the first six months of 2023, VMT in Wisconsin was 2% higher than during the first six months of 2022 as travel returned to within 1% of pre-COVID levels. Traffic congestion causes up to 46 annual hours of delay for the average motorist in some areas and costs the average driver up to \$1,078 annually in lost time and wasted fuel.

Statewide, drivers lose \$1.9 billion annually as a result of lost time and wasted fuel due to traffic congestion. The TRIP report includes a list of the state's most congested highway sections during AM and PM peak travel hours, as measured by Vehicle Hours of Delay (VHD).

"The effective flow of goods, services and people is fundamental to business and economic growth, and transportation infrastructure is a top issue among business executives determining desirable locations for commercial investment.

One of the most congested corridors in the TRIP report is the I-94 East-West Corridor. The Waukesha County Business Alliance has been a long-time advocate for modernization of the I-94 East-West Corridor with eight lanes to safely handle the traffic of today and beyond. This corridor is the gateway for the products and venues that make Southeast Wisconsin and our state vibrant. Each year, millions of vehicles and \$25 billion in freight travel along this corridor.

The I-94 East/ West project is a top priority for our business community and critical to improving the safety of the corridor and the long-term economic vitality of our region and Wisconsin," said Amanda Payne, senior vice president of public policy for the Waukesha County Business Alliance.

Traffic crashes in Wisconsin claimed the lives of 2,967 people between 2018 and 2022.

Wisconsin's overall traffic fatality rate of 0.96 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2022 is lower than the national average of 1.35. The fatality rate on Wisconsin's non-Interstate rural roads in 2020 was nearly double that on all other roads in the state (1.49 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.76). Traffic crashes in Wisconsin imposed a total of \$7.8 billion in

economic costs in 2022. TRIP estimates that roadway features, while not the primary factor, were likely a contributing factor in approximately one-third of all fatal traffic crashes, resulting in \$2.6 billion in economic costs in Wisconsin in 2022. These costs include work and household productivity losses, property damage, medical costs, rehabilitation costs, legal and court costs, congestion costs, and emergency services.

"Prioritizing infrastructure investment is the cornerstone of sustainable commercial real estate," said Tracy Johnson, president of the Transportation Development Association of Wisconsin and president and CEO of the Commercial Association of Realtors Wisconsin (CARW). "These strategic investments enhance connectivity, accessibility, and economic vitality and support not only the transport of goods but also workers across the region. The latest TRIP report illustrates Wisconsin's opportunity for further sustainable infrastructure enhancements, promising improved roadways that instill confidence in commercial investors, making our state a prime destination for real estate development and expansion."

Improvements to Wisconsin's roads, highways and bridges are funded by local, state and federal governments. Governor Evers' 2019-2021 Wisconsin Biennial Budget included an increase of 20% (a total of \$318 million) in funding for the State Highway Rehabilitation Program and provided structural enhancements to continuing sources of state transportation revenues.

To further strengthen the program, the state's 2021-2023 Biennial Budget provided a 6.8 increase to maintain "real dollar" purchasing power in transportation. Wisconsin transportation funding was boosted by the passage of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which was signed into law by President Biden in November 2021. The IIJA will provide \$5.5 billion for road, highway and bridge repairs in Wisconsin over the five years of the bill, including a 25% increase in highway and bridge funding provided to Wisconsin in FY 2022. However, inflation in the cost of providing highway and bridge repairs is hindering the ability of increased funds to address the state's transportation needs. The Federal Highway Administration's national highway construction cost index, which measures labor and materials cost, increased by 27% during 2022.

"Additional state and federal funding will allow Wisconsin to move forward with needed improvements to its transportation network that will make the state's roads and bridges smoother, safer and more efficient while boosting the economy and creating jobs," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director. "A safe and reliable transportation system that is maintained in good condition and offers improved mobility and accessibility to meet the needs of Wisconsin residents, businesses, and tourists alike, is critical to moving Wisconsin forward."