

TRIP: New Mexico Roads, Bridges Need Improvements

January 26, 2024 | Administrator

A lack of sufficient transportation funding will make it difficult to adequately maintain and improve New Mexico's existing transportation system. Increased investment in transportation improvements could relieve traffic congestion, improve road, bridge and transit conditions, boost safety, and support long-term economic growth in New Mexico, according to a new report released by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit.

New Mexico roads and bridges that are deteriorated, congested or lack some desirable safety features cost the state's motorists a total of \$3.3 billion annually – as much as \$2,980 per driver- due to higher vehicle operating costs as a result of driving on rough roads, congestion-related delays and the financial costs of traffic crashes.

The report, entitled "New Mexico Transportation by the Numbers: Meeting the state's need for safe, smooth and efficient mobility," includes regional pavement and bridge conditions, highway safety data, and cost breakdowns for the Albuquerque, Las Cruces and Santa Fe urban areas and statewide.

The TRIP report finds 32% of major locally and state-maintained roads in New Mexico are in poor condition and another 21% are in mediocre condition, costing the average motorist an additional \$940 each year in extra vehicle operating costs (VOC), including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs, and increased fuel consumption and tire wear.

"A substantial investment in public infrastructure, specifically transportation, at a time when we have unprecedented state revenues, will ensure that our state's economy continues to grow and will keep our citizens safe," said Sen. Michael Padilla, New Mexico State Senate majority whip and Senate Finance Committee member.

Traffic congestion in New Mexico results in some drivers losing up to 48 hours annually in traffic delays and wasting up to 20 gal. of fuel. Statewide, New Mexico drivers lose \$1 billion annually as a result of lost time and wasted fuel due to traffic congestion – as much as \$1,276 per driver in the most congested areas of the state. During the first nine months of 2023, as compared to

the first nine months of 2022, vehicle miles of travel in New Mexico increased 4.2%, the largest increase in the nation during that time.

Five percent of New Mexico's bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition, meaning there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. 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 New Mexico, 47% of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier. While the state has made significant improvements in bridge conditions since 2002 as a result of increased funding for bridge repair, preservation and maintenance, the condition of bridges is projected to decline over the next decade under current funding projections.

The share of National Highway System (NHS) bridges in the state with deck area in poor condition is projected to increase from 3.3% in 2002 to 6% in 2031, while the share of deck area in good condition is projected to decline from 34.5% to 26.7%.

Improvement and reconstruction projects statewide have been identified by the New Mexico Department of Transportation. While nearly \$6.6 billion is needed for these projects, they remain unfunded. The full report includes a list of needed but unfunded projects throughout the state.

"It is critical that our state invest sufficiently in our transportation infrastructure to ensure that we keep our citizens safe and our economy growing," said New Mexico State Representative Dayan Hochman-Vigil, chair of the New Mexico House Transportation, Public Works and Capital Improvements Committee.

From 2018 to 2022, 2,162 people were killed in traffic crashes in New Mexico. In 2022, New Mexico had 1.77 traffic fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled, the third highest rate in the nation and significantly higher than the national average of 1.35.

The number of fatalities in New Mexico increased 10% from 2019 to 2022, from 424 to 466, and the state's fatality rate per 100 million VMT increased 16% during that time, from 1.53 to 1.77. This increase in the number of fatalities and the rate of fatalities

per 100 million VMT happened while vehicle travel in the state decreased by 3% overall from 2019 to 2022.

The efficiency and condition of New Mexico's transportation system, particularly its highways, is critical to the health of the state's economy. Annually, \$143 billion in goods are shipped to and from New Mexico, relying heavily on the state's network of roads and bridges. The value of freight shipped to and from sites in New Mexico, in inflation-adjusted dollars, is expected to increase 53% by 2050.

"As the numbers clearly indicate, one way or another, New Mexico drivers will pay for infrastructure. We can invest in improvements, modernization and maintenance of our transportation system, which will provide New Mexico residents with safer and more efficient roads, less time in traffic and lower vehicle operating costs. Or we can continue to under-invest, and New Mexico drivers will continue to lose more than \$3.3 billion per year and continue to be stuck with congested, deteriorating infrastructure. The choice seems self-evident," said Shawn Hammer, president of the Associated Contractors of New Mexico board of directors.

The level of highway investment is set to increase as a result of the five-year federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), signed into law in November 2021, which will provide \$3.2 billion in road, highway and bridge funding from 2022 to 2026, resulting in a 38% increase in federal funding starting in 2022.

"Without adequate funding, New Mexico's transportation system will become increasingly deteriorated and congested, hampering economic growth, safety and quality of life," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director. "While additional federal funding from the IIJA will help New Mexico 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, the state will also need to provide an adequate and sustainable investment in its transportation network."