

LONG ISLAND/TRANSPORTATION

## RISING COST OF DRIVING: Crumbling roads, traffic safety issues hit average NY-area drivers for an extra \$3,697, report shows – up 16% from 2021

FRONT PAGE



The cost of driving a car in New York is up more than 15%. NewsdayTV's Ken Buffa reports. Credit: Newsday/Howard Schnapp; NewsdayTV

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A Sunday morning doughnut run for a Nassau County driver wound up being more than she bargained for when a gaping pothole in North Bellmore blew out her car's tire, setting her back \$105.

Elizabeth Rafferty's unforeseen expense caused by a crumbling, rain-filled pit on Jerusalem Avenue illustrates the increasing cost of driving in the metropolitan area, where over half of state and major locally maintained roads remain in poor or fair condition, according to an analysis of state and federal transportation data released this week by TRIP, a Washington, D.C., think tank. Another 24% are mediocre and 22% are good, the highest rating.

Deteriorating roads, along with traffic, wasted fuel, vehicle maintenance and safety are costing drivers regionally an additional \$3,697 annually, according to TRIP. That's 16% more expensive than the last report released in 2022, with the biggest factor being inflation, according to Rocky Moretti, TRIP director of policy and research.

"It's driving up the cost to the public," Moretti said in an interview, adding that the report highlights a deficient transportation system. Even with increased federal infrastructure spending, because of rising labor and material costs, it'll take a greater investment to fix the problem.

### WHAT TO KNOW

- **Congestion, wasted fuel, and poor roads** are costing drivers in the metropolitan area an additional \$3,697 annually to operate their vehicles, according to a new report.
- **The biggest expense is linked to traffic**, with metro drivers wasting 91 hours sitting in congestion and burning 37 gallons of fuel a year.
- **Experts said the report underscores** the need for more funding to improve the region's infrastructure.

Moretti said without improving roads, "it is going to cost far more to the public in terms of reduced safety, reduced reliability and increased operating costs."

Though peak pothole season is still a couple of months away, Rafferty's ordeal on Sunday may strike a chord across Long Island, where driving is the predominant mode of travel and the roadway network is more vulnerable to damage due to high car and truck traffic, extreme weather and aging infrastructure. All those elements strain the network and drain pockets.

**Mechanic: Eight customers from North Bellmore pothole last week**

Nick Sheuchenko, manager of Complete Automotive Repair in North Bellmore, said that last week eight or nine drivers came in for service for running into the same hole as Rafferty, which the state Department of Transportation acknowledged appeared to be caused by an issue with a water main. Since Rafferty's ill-fated doughnut run, the agency has added a warning sign and placed a metal plate over the pothole.



A metal plate covers the North Bellmore pothole in front of a strip mall on Jerusalem Avenue just east of Newbridge Road Wednesday. Credit: Howard Schnapp

"I didn't see that pothole because it was raining and it was covered with water. The question is why did it take so long to do something," Raftery said. "I'm lucky that for now it's just the tire. It could have been so much worse."

Raftery wants to hold someone accountable and will be applying for reimbursement from the state Department of Transportation — despite a state law exempting the agency from liability for damages occurring from Nov. 15 through May 1.

There are over 2 million vehicles registered on Long Island, according to the Department of Motor Vehicles. Marc Herbst, the executive director of the Long Island Contractors' Association, said Suffolk and Nassau are the only two counties in the state with so many registered vehicles, making infrastructure needs more pronounced.

He recently testified at a state legislative transportation hearing calling for increased funding, pointing out that the current DOT capital plan for fiscal years 2023-27 provides less than a 1% increase in average annual spending relative to fiscal year 2022 levels for Long Island.

While the group has made similar appeals for additional money in prior years, Herbst also noted pavement conditions on Long Island have gotten worse, with only 59% in "good to excellent" condition in 2021 compared with 84% being in good to excellent shape in 2017.

He told Newsday the agency's funding "has been eaten away with inflation and supply chain issues. Any big boost that we anticipated has not occurred," Herbst said, also pointing out that the lack of a formal roadway maintenance schedule is an issue the state and many local agencies face.

The state Department of Transportation recently undertook major repaving projects on the Long Island Expressway, the Southern State and Northern State parkways. The agency paved 208 lane miles and revamped 263 bridges in 2023.

"New York is currently in the second year of its five-year capital plan, which at \$32.9 billion is the largest such plan of its kind in state history and includes a \$2.1 billion investment in Long Island's roads and bridges," Stephen Canzoneri, a DOT spokesman for the LI region, said in statement.

He added the report on the cost and condition of the region's roads "highlights the need for continued federal partnership and commitment to a long-term national strategy to address infrastructure needs." Herbst said there are plenty of other roads, like the Robert Moses Causeway that still need repairing.

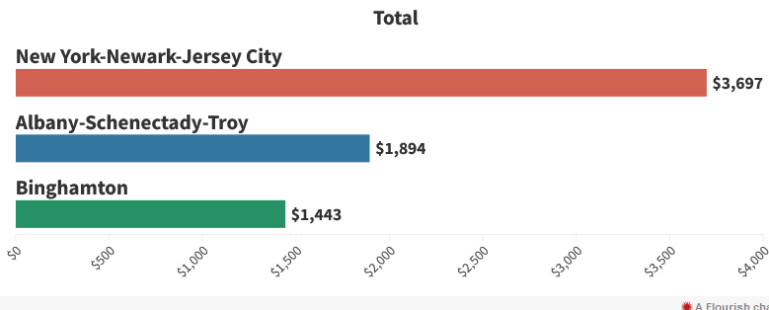
### Report focused on safety, congestion, operating costs

The report's big annual expense figure includes three categories, safety, congestion and vehicle operating costs. The biggest expense for drivers, \$2,459, is linked to congestion — with drivers losing 92 hours a year and burning through an additional 37 gallons of fuel in 2023, according to the report. That's up since 2021 when TRIP estimated drivers spent \$2,107 as a result of congestion.

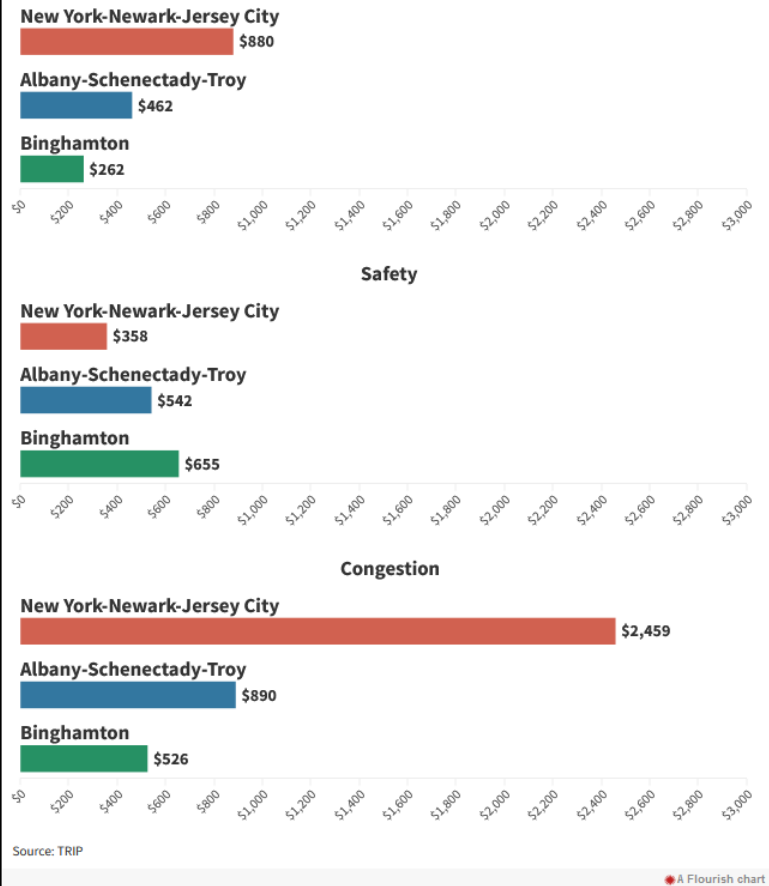
Another \$880 is due to vehicle operating costs linked to driving on rough roads that includes more maintenance, additional fuel consumption and tire wear, and accelerated vehicle depreciation, Moretti said. Drivers also spend an average of \$358 due to traffic crashes where inadequate safety features likely contributed.

### Deficient road costs

What the average motorist pays due to roads that are rough, congested and lack safety features that contributed to crashes.



### Vehicle operating costs



Experts said the report confirms it's going to take more funding to make needed improvements.

Robert Sinclair Jr., spokesman with the AAA Northeast, said the region faces an extraordinary set of challenges posed by snow, ice and salt air as well as overall congestion, including increased freight traffic. Sinclair said the lack of a direct rail freight tunnel from New Jersey into New York City and Long Island means 96% of all cargo into the region is delivered on trucks.

"We have a very, very strong set of negative circumstances that we have to deal with to keep our roads in decent condition and we're not spending enough to do it," Sinclair said.

The study looked at the eight largest urban areas in the state, including the Albany-Schenectady-Troy region, where additional driving costs were nearly 65% less than the metro area, which includes Newark and Jersey City. In Albany, drivers spent an additional \$1,894 to drive their vehicle annually, with \$890 of that tied to being stuck in 46 hours of traffic a year, \$542 due to road safety and \$462 in additional vehicle operating costs.

Of all the regions assessed, drivers shelled out the least amount of extra costs in Binghamton, which was calculated at \$1,443 annually. The report found that decaying roads, traffic and safety issues ended up costing all drivers in the state an extra \$36.7 billion in additional vehicle expenses.

Al Eisenberg, owner of Al's Hubcaps & Wheel Repair in Mineola, said this winter, which hasn't seen much snow, isn't as bad as others, but there is never a shortage of craters or repairs.

"Don't kid yourself, how much money drivers spend is not a seasonal thing, it's year-round," he added.

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