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Rising Costs Threaten Road, Bridge Investments in West Virginia

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photo by: Eric Ayres

Crews from Triton Construction continue to work on the West Virginia Division of Highways' massive Downtown Streetscape Project in Wheeling, one of the state's many multimillion-dollar improvement projects to take place in recent years.

WHEELING — Significant investments have been made in recent years to improve the condition of roads and bridges in West Virginia, but inflation and increased construction costs are threatening future improvements moving forward. On Tuesday, new West Virginia Secretary of

Transportation Todd Rumbaugh took part in a virtual news conference hosted by officials from TRIP — a national transportation research nonprofit which released findings from its latest report on the condition, use, safety and efficiency of the Mountain State's surface transportation system.

Rumbaugh said the report clearly shows that despite West Virginia's major investments in its roads and bridges over the past several years, it is not enough to keep the transportation system up to date. More funding and more work will be needed to stay ahead of the increasing maintenance costs, the secretary noted.

The report, titled "Keeping West Virginia Moving Forward: Progress and Challenges in Achieving a 21st Century Transportation System," was formulated from data collected from the WVDOT and U.S. Department of Transportation and focuses on road and bridge conditions, vehicle travel statistics and vehicle safety across the state, as well as related regional data.

"The most critical finding is that while additional funding at the state and federal level have been critical in allowing West Virginia to move forward with numerous projects to improve the condition of its system, we've also seen in the last several years a significant increase in inflation of highway construction costs, and that unfortunately has dented — to some extent — the impact of the additional funds," said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research for TRIP.

The TRIP report noted that 30% of major roads statewide — whether they're maintained by local or state government — have pavements in poor or mediocre condition. The report also looked at the condition of bridges and found that 19% of bridges in West Virginia are currently rated in poor condition.

"The TRIP report doesn't indicate that the bridges are unsafe," Moretti stressed. "If they were, they would be closed — (regardless of) whether they were local or state maintained — or they would be restricted to carrying lighter vehicles. The challenge is that these bridges are absolutely vital to the quality of life and the health of West Virginia's economy, so moving forward, the state needs to

significantly improve the overall condition of the state's bridges.

Moretti said the quality of the state's economy relies on its roads.

According to the report, roads and bridges in the Wheeling area fell roughly in the middle of the pack in terms of overall conditions compared to other urban areas of the state.

"The TRIP report found that in the Wheeling area, 31% of the region's major roadways have maintenance in either poor or mediocre condition, which is costing the average motorist in the Wheeling area \$493 annually in additional operating costs because of driving on rough roads," Moretti said, adding that the report showed that 14% of the area's bridges were rated in poor condition and in need of repair, with another 45% rated in fair condition.

There were no new updates for Wheeling's most famous bridge, the Suspension Bridge, which has not been available for vehicular traffic since 2019.

"That's a very good question and I'd love to give you a very good answer," Rumbaugh said. "That's one of the subjects that I haven't been able to get into yet, but plan to get into when I have a chance. I've only been in this position for about 90 days, but the Wheeling Suspension Bridge is very precious to us."

Compared to other metro areas in West Virginia, Wheeling's road condition statistics were not so bad. Ten percent of roads were listed as being in poor condition, with 21% mediocre, 18% fair and 51% good. Morgantown's road conditions were listed as 29% poor and 22% mediocre — the highest percentage of roads in either category among cities in the report — 13% fair and 36% good.

In the Parkersburg area, 20% of major roads are in poor or mediocre condition — 6% poor and 14% mediocre — costing the average driver \$376 annually in extra vehicle operating costs. The 6% of poor roads was the second lowest among cities in the report, behind Beckley's 4%. Also, 20% of Parkersburg's roads were fair and 60% were good.

In the Weirton-Steubenville area, 35% of major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, 18% poor and 17% mediocre, costing the average driver \$625 annually in extra vehicle operating costs. Sixteen percent of the area's roads were in fair condition, with 49% in good condition.

Bridges in West Virginia's metro areas varied widely in different condition category percentages. While the Beckley area boasted the best numbers for road conditions, it topped the list for percentage of its bridges in poor condition with 25%. The Weirton-Steubenville area joined the Charleston and Parkersburg areas with the lowest percentage of bridges listed in poor condition at 12%.

Moretti noted that Wheeling area motorists spend 39 hours annually stuck in traffic congestion and wasting 18 gallons of fuel — costing an average \$1,069 annually in cost of lost time and wasted fuel. Wheeling's congestion statistics were the worst among urban areas of the state, according to the TRIP report, which listed Charleston motorists as losing 26 hours to traffic congestion at an annual cost of \$744 per driver and motorists in the Weirton-Steubenville area losing 21 hours at \$570 per driver each year.

In 2017 West Virginia received a significant boost in funding both legislatively and subsequently in a voter referendum that allowed the state to move forward with its Roads to Prosperity program, Moretti noted. This enabled West Virginia to increase investments in its road and bridge projects by 67% between 2018 and 2023. A federal

bipartisan infrastructure bill approved in 2021 also provided an additional \$3.6 billion for surface transportation in the state, Moretti noted.

"This additional funding has allowed the state to move forward with the repaving of 8,400 miles of roadways in West Virginia and the repair of 3,400 bridges since 2018," he said. "Unfortunately, there has been a significant increase in highway construction inflation. Since the beginning in 2022, this has increased the price of highway construction projects by 45%. This has had a significant negative impact on these additional funds to proceed with needed work."

The transportation secretary said more funding is needed. "It really echoes and shows that the investments we've made, while they've helped, it's not adequate," Rumbaugh said, noting that the investments through projects like Roads to Prosperity undoubtedly benefited the state and local communities. "While that did help and we put that money to good use doing a lot of projects and bringing things up to modern standards, it did not solve all of our problems, and only began to touch on things."

Now with that whirlwind of major projects in the rear view mirror, Rumbaugh said funding levels in the state are declining.

"We're looking to reorganize and restructure," the secretary said. "With the guidance of Gov. Morrisey, we're going to get much more efficient. We're going to improve our roadways. Our goals are to get our 'good' roads level increased and to decrease 'poor' structures."

Rumbaugh said over the next four years, the state needs to get ahead of the game in several areas, including areas where growth has contributed to traffic congestion and in locations where safety can be improved.

From 2019 to 2023, a total of 1,340 people were killed in traffic crashes in West Virginia — an average of 268 fatalities per year. The state's 2023 traffic fatality rate of 1.64 fatalities for every 100 million miles traveled was the fifth highest in the nation — higher than the national average of 1.26.

Nationally, the spike in traffic fatalities has been attributed to an increase in distracted driving, including the use of cell phones behind the wheel.

"We are the most mountainous state in the country," Rumbaugh said. "Everywhere you go, you're up, down, around and around. It almost becomes a roller coaster on some of our roads. Distracted driving is one of the highest causes of accidents. The use of cell phones while people are driving has dramatically increased, which has led to a lot more accidents around the country. Any death on a road in West Virginia is one too many."

The secretary said these roads can be made safer through surface treatments, addition of rumble strips, improved signage and lighting, safer designs and other measures. Jason Pizatella, CEO of the Contractors Association of West Virginia, said that investments in the state's infrastructure has been "nothing short of transformational" in the wake of the Roads to Prosperity program and the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, which he noted expires in the fall of 2026.

"But as I say that — and the secretary has already pointed it out — it's not adequate to keep our system where West Virginians — and those who live here and those who work here and visit here — expect," Pizatella said. "I think it's critical that our policy makers continue investing in our roads and bridges in West Virginia both at the state level in the legislature and in the Morrisey administration — and also in Washington."