

Report lists state of roads, bridges

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A lack of transportation funding, increasing construction costs and evolving transportation demands are projected to lead to declining conditions and could jeopardize future economic competitiveness. That's based on information in a new report that examines pavement and bridge conditions, traffic safety and funding needs on Pennsylvania's system of local roads and bridges, and was released at a virtual news conference on Thursday.

The report, entitled "Pennsylvania's Local Roads & Bridges: Providing a Modern, Sustainable Local Transportation System in the Keystone State," was prepared by TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit based in Washington, D.C.

Pennsylvania's local roads and bridges carry 44% of vehicle travel in the state and account for 94% of roadway mileage and 75% of the state's bridges.

Joining TRIP for the regional virtual press conference were Robert S. Carl Jr.,

president and CEO of Schuylkill Chamber of Commerce; Matt Espenshade, president of Pennsylvania State Grange; and Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research, TRIP.

Local road conditions

According to the TRIP report, 26% of Pennsylvania's more than 33,000 miles of local roads maintained by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation are rated in poor condition; 23% are in fair condition; 30% are in good condition; and the remaining 22% are in excellent condition.

"Safe and efficient travel is critical to the success of our agriculture community," Espenshade said. "Investment to maintain and improve our local roads and bridges is critical.

"As the president of the Pennsylvania State Grange and as a dairy farmer, I understand how critical it is for producers to be able to transport agricultural products safely and promptly. Our farming operations also depend on deliveries of feed, fuel and other necessities for our farming operations to continue running smoothly." The report includes the number and share of miles local pavements in poor, fair, good and excellent condition in each county and statewide. Results are:

- Monroe County, 454 miles, with 43% in poor condition; 19% in fair condition; 29% in good shape; and 8% in excellent shape.
- Schuylkill County, 510 miles, 36% in poor condition; 26% in fair condition; 29% are in good shape; and 10% excellent.
- Lehigh County, 400 miles, 35% in poor condition; 28% fair condition; 31% in good shape; and 7% in excellent shape.
- Northampton County, 395 miles, 33% in poor condition; 25% fair; 31% are in good shape; and 11% in excellent shape.

Local bridge conditions

According to the TRIP report, 14% of Pennsylvania's local bridges — those maintained by PennDOT and local governments — were rated in poor/structurally deficient condition.

A bridge is rated as poor/structurally deficient if there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components. "Schuylkill County is the third largest geographic land mass county in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania with 783 square miles," Carl said. "Because of this significant geography and our rural nature, supporting the maintenance and improvements of our infrastructure is directly related to our core mission of promoting commerce for businesses and nonprofits and supporting the quality of life for our residents."

Fifty-two percent of the state's local bridges are rated in fair condition, and the remaining 35% are in good condition. Of Carbon County's 137 bridges, 23% are in poor shape; 62% are in fair shape; and 15% are in good shape.

Monroe County has 338 bridges, with 22% in poor shape; 51% fair; and 28% in good shape.

Of Schuylkill County's 408 bridges, 27% are poor; 52% fair; and 21% in good shape.

Lehigh County has 324 bridges, 17% in poor shape; 56% fair; and 27% in good shape.

Of Northampton County's 330 bridges, 13% are in poor shape; 55% fair shape; and 32% in good shape.

Traffic safety

From 2019 to 2023, 5,808 people were killed in traffic crashes in Pennsylvania, an average of 1,161 fatalities per year.

Between 2019 to 2023, 3,391 people were killed in traffic crashes on Pennsylvania's local roads, representing 58% of state traffic fatalities during that period.

The traffic fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on the state's local roads was 80% higher than the fatality rate on all other roads in the state, which includes the state's interstate and other major highways (1.55 verses 0.86).

"Pennsylvania's local roads and bridges are the backbone of the state's transportation network and will require adequate, sustained investment and improvements in order to continue providing mobility and economic opportunity for Pennsylvania's residents and businesses," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director.

The report includes the average annual number of traffic fatalities on local roads from 2019 to 2023 and the traffic fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel on local roads in each Pennsylvania county and statewide.

In Carbon, the average annual local road fatalities in that time span were 7 (local road fatality rate per 100 vehicle miles traveled); in Monroe, 16 (1.98); in Schuylkill, 15 (2.35); in Lehigh, 16 (1.41); and in Northampton, 12 (1.13).

Pennsylvania's roads, highways and bridges are funded by investments from local, state and federal governments.

PennDOT projects that, given anticipated funding levels, state-owned pavements conditions are forecasted to decline over the next decade on all roads.

State-owned bridge conditions are also projected to decline, especially local bridges.

Local road and bridge conditions are projected to deteriorate in the future, as PennDOT will be forced to allocate limited financial resources to maintaining NHS routes to federally mandated standards, leaving fewer resources available for the state's local roads.

According to PennDOT's Transportation Asset Management Plan, "the financial burden of maintaining the NHS at the federally mandated condition levels for pavements and bridges will create a shortfall for the rest of the transportation system, as PennDOT does not receive sufficient funding to maintain NHS and non-NHS pavements and bridges to the same standard."

In addition to state transportation funding, the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act signed into law in November 2021 will provide \$11.3 billion in federal funds to the state for highway and bridge investments in Pennsylvania over five years, representing a 29% increase in annual federal funding for roads and bridges in the state over the previous federal surface transportation program. The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act is set to expire on Sept. 30, 2026.

Increasing inflation has also hampered Pennsylvania's ability to complete needed projects and improvements, as the available funding now covers significantly less work.

The Federal Highway Administration's national highway construction cost index, which measures labor and materials cost, increased by 54% from the beginning of 2022 through the third quarter of 2024.