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KEEPING MONTANA MOVING FORWARD:

PROGRESS & CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING A 21ST CENTURY TRANSPORTATION SYSTEM IN THE BIG SKY STATE

MAY 2026

Founded in 1971, TRIP ® of Washington, DC, is a nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues. TRIP is sponsored by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; labor unions; and organizations concerned with efficient and safe surface transportation.

Executive Summary

Montana's extensive system of roads, highways and bridges provides the state's residents, visitors and businesses with a high level of mobility. As the backbone of the Big Sky State's economy, Montana's surface transportation system plays a vital role in the state's economic well-being and is an integral part of what makes Montana an attractive place to live, work and do business.

Montana faces significant challenges on many of the state's most critical transportation routes, including the need to add capacity to support economic development, to improve roadway safety and to address pavement and bridge deterioration. This report looks at the condition and use of Montana's system of roads, highways and bridges and provides information on the state's top transportation challenges and the improvements needed to address them.

An adequate and reliable source of transportation funding is critical to providing the system of roads, highways and bridges that can support commerce within Montana and connect the state to markets around the globe, while providing the safe, smooth and efficient mobility that residents require. With the current level of transportation funding available, Montana faces challenges in accommodating growing passenger and freight traffic, and providing needed roadway safety improvements and road, highway and bridge repairs.

TRIP's "Keeping Moving Montana Forward" report examines the mobility, efficiency, condition and safety of Montana's surface transportation system and the challenges Montana faces to accommodate future transportation growth and sustain adequate state funding. Sources of information for this report include the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA), the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), and the U.S. Census Bureau.

MONTANA'S TRANSPORTATION FUNDING & CHALLENGES

Investment in Montana's roads, highways and bridges is funded by local, state and federal governments. Montana faces significant challenges on many of the state's most critical transportation routes, including the need to add capacity to support economic development, to improve roadway safety and to address pavement and bridge deterioration.

The Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) has identified the state's top challenges. The following is TRIP's ranking of Montana's top 10 transportation challenges, with all 24 challenges identified by MDT listed in the body of the report.

1. **Montana's Aging Bridges: A Growing Challenge:** Across Montana, hundreds of bridges are posted with weight limits. Many of these are older timber bridges that are nearing the end of their useful life. These restrictions create major challenges for commercial trucking and agriculture, making it harder to move goods from farms to markets efficiently. Addressing these aging bridges is essential to keep Montana's economy moving and ensure safe travel for everyone.

2. **US 191 – Four Corners to MT 64:** A corridor study outlined over $350 Million of needed improvements. However, the design options are restricted given the topography along the corridor. The corridor experiences seasonal traffic queueing and congestion. Projects that are being designed or constructed along this corridor now include Big Sky – North; Spanish Creek – Gallatin Canyon; and Passing Lanes – Gallatin Canyon.

3. **Statewide Culverts**: A multitude of large and small culverts across the state are in need of replacement due to their age and poor condition. A combination of bundled and site-specific projects is anticipated to address culverts identified through MDT's asset management program.

4. **Interstate 90 – Billings Area**: Additional capacity is needed in the Billings area along with new interchanges at Lockwood Interchange and Johnson Lane Interchange. Major projects in this area are currently being constructed and designed, including Lockwood Interchange and Johnson Lane Interchange (BBP); and recently completed projects include I-90 Yellowstone River and Mossmain-W. Billings Interchange.

5. **Highway 212 Safety Improvement and Capacity:** MDT will be initiating safety and capacity improvement projects on Hwy 212. These projects will include passing lanes between Busby and Lame Deer; passing lanes at Ashland Flats; shoulder widening, possibly passing lanes, and pavement preservation work between Broadus and Alzada.

6. **Interstate 90 – Idaho to St. Regis:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from the Idaho border to St. Regis. Several projects are currently being designed or have recently been constructed along this section of I-90. Taft – West, a concrete paving project now complete. Lookout Pass – East and Saltese – East slated for construction beginning in 2026. Projects currently in design include: Taft – Saltese; DeBorgia – E&W; and I-90 Bridge Rehab needed throughout corridor.

7. **Interstate 90 – Hardin to Wyoming:** Due to the age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from Hardin to the border with Wyoming. Several pavement preservation projects are designed on this section of I-90. These projects are Wyoming Line-North, Dunmore-East, and Crow Agency-Garryowen. MDT recently completed a project on I-90 in the vicinity of Toluca due to subsurface movement that has dramatically reduced the condition of the roadway. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor.

8. **Interstate 15 – Great Falls to Sweetgrass:** Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor, along with improvements to address a lack of interchange capacity and roadway deterioration.

9. **Interstate 94 – Forsyth to North Dakota**: Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from Miles City to the border with North Dakota. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor, and several pavement preservation projects are currently being designed. Completed or under construction include Colstrip Interchange– West; Bridge Decks West of Forsyth; Broadus Interchange – Miles City; Bridge Decks Miles City Area; Bridge Decks Terry – Fallon; Bad Route Interchange SW; Bad Route Interchange NE; Bridge Rehab – Circle Interchange; and East of Glendive East. Pavement preservation and culvert rehab projects in development include West of Hathaway – West; Miles City – West; Powder River – West; Glendive East and West; Bridge Deck – Glendive Area; Hodges Interchange – East; Wibaux East and West; and culvert rehab in the Glendive and Miles City areas.

10. **Interstate 90 – Bozeman:** Capacity improvements are needed to address capacity and performance issues between Three Forks and Rocky Canyon. Rocky Canyon (I-90) was constructed this year. Interchange improvements have been recently completed at the 19th Street Interchange. Belgrade – Bozeman resurfacing has been awarded and will be constructed in 2026. Three Forks Area Bridge Decks was also recently awarded and will be constructed in 2026 as well.

PAVEMENT CONDITIONS & EXTRA VEHICLE OPERATING COSTS IN MONTANA

Statewide, 31 percent of Montana's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition. Twelve percent of Montana's major locally and state-maintained roads are in poor condition and 19 percent are in mediocre condition. Fifteen percent of Montana's major roads are in fair condition and the remaining 54 percent are in good condition. Driving on rough roads costs the average Montana driver $605 annually in additional vehicle operating costs – a total of $532 million statewide. These additional vehicle operating costs (VOC) include accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional vehicle repair costs, increased fuel consumption and increased tire wear.

The chart below details pavement conditions on major roads in the state's largest urban areas and the extra vehicle operating costs per-driver associated with driving on rough roads.

Location	Poor	Mediocre	Fair	Good	VOC
Billings	27%	19%	14%	40%	$769
Great Falls	32%	23%	12%	33%	$881
Missoula	25%	16%	9%	49%	$702
MONTANA STATEWIDE	**12%**	**19%**	**15%**	**54%**	**$605**

BRIDGE CONDITIONS IN MONTANA

Seven percent (388 of 5,235) of Montana'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. Sixty percent of the state's bridges are rated in fair condition and the remaining 32 percent 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 Montana, 39 percent of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier. The chart below details bridge conditions statewide and in the state's largest urban areas.

	POOR/STRUCTURALLY DEFICIENT		FAIR		GOOD		TOTAL BRIDGES
	Number	Share	Number	Share	Number	Share	
Billings	7	2%	186	64%	97	33%	290
Great Falls	11	6%	97	52%	77	42%	185
Missoula	15	7%	125	61%	66	32%	206
MONTANA STATEWIDE	**388**	**7%**	**3,165**	**60%**	**1,682**	**32%**	**5,235**

TRAFFIC SAFETY IN MONTANA

From 2019 to 2024, 1,262 people were killed in traffic crashes in Montana, an average of 210 fatalities each year. Montana traffic fatalities began to increase dramatically in 2020 and peaked in 2021, even as vehicle travel rates plummeted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the number of traffic fatalities has fallen in recent years, it is still significantly higher than in 2019. Despite decreasing each year from 2021 to 2024, the state's traffic fatality rate per 100 million VMT in 2024 was the seventh highest in the U.S.

MONTANA TRAFFIC FATALITY DATA						
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Traffic Fatalities	184	213	239	213	208	205
Fatalities per 100M VMT	1.43	1.76	1.77	1.58	1.50	1.47

The fatality rate on Montana's non-Interstate rural roads in 2023 was nearly two and a half times higher than all other roads in the state (2.13 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.92). A disproportionate share of fatalities take place on Montana's rural roads: while 49 percent of vehicle travel in the state takes place on rural non-Interstate roads, 69 percent of fatalities occur on rural non-Interstate Montana roads.

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 $500 million in economic costs in Montana in 2024. The economic costs of traffic crashes include work and household productivity losses, property damage, medical costs, rehabilitation costs, legal and court costs, congestion costs and emergency services.

CONGESTION & TRAVEL RELIABILITY IN MONTANA

Congested roads, highways and bottlenecks choke commuting and commerce and keep Montana residents and visitors from efficiently getting to their destination. From 2000 to 2024, vehicle travel in Montana increased by 40 percent – the seventh largest increase in the U.S. during that time.

While congestion in Montana is largely contained to the state's largest urban areas and tourist destinations, these areas experience delays and decreases in reliability. The chart below details the number of annual hours lost to congestion, cost of lost time and wasted fuel and gallons of fuel wasted per driver in the state's largest urban areas.

Location	Hours Lost to Congestion	Annual Cost	Gallons of Fuel Wasted
Billings	29	$468	6
Great Falls	21	$328	4
Missoula	41	$680	9

TRANSPORTATION AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN MONTANA

The health and future growth of Montana's economy is riding on its transportation system. In 2024 Montana's freight system moved 164 million tons of freight, valued at $83 billion. From 2024 to 2050, annual freight movement by trucks in Montana is expected to increase 59 percent by weight and 89 percent by value (inflation-adjusted dollars). This anticipated growth in freight transport in Montana, and the rest of the U.S., is a result of further economic growth, changing business and retail models, increasing international trade, and rapidly changing consumer expectations that place an emphasis on faster deliveries, often of smaller packages or payloads.

According to a report by the American Road & Transportation Builders Association, the design, construction and maintenance of transportation infrastructure in Montana supports approximately 17,000 full-time jobs across all sectors of the economy. These skilled workers earn $586 million annually. Approximately 214,000 full-time jobs in Montana in key industries like tourism, retail sales, agriculture and manufacturing rely on an efficient and safe transportation network.

Sources of information for this report include the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT), the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), the American Road and Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA), the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS), the U.S. Census Bureau, the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). All data used in the report are the most recent available. Cover photo credit: Mark Fagan.

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Introduction

Montana's surface transportation system provides a vital link for the state's residents, visitors and businesses, providing daily access to homes, jobs, shopping, natural resources and recreation. Supporting quality of life and a robust economy in Montana requires that the state provide an efficient, safe and well-maintained transportation system that allows for a high level of accessibility, connectivity and safety.

Montana relies on a diverse economy including tourism, agriculture, forestry, mining and energy extraction. A safe, well-maintained and reliable network of roads and bridges is critical to each of these sectors and to the economic health of the state and the nation. Deteriorated roads, highways and bridges, a lack of adequate roadway safety features, and highways that lack adequate capacity to support economic development opportunities are a detriment to the state's residents, visitors and businesses because they hamper mobility and cause delays, reduce economic productivity and competitiveness, and increase costs of operating vehicles for individuals and businesses because of the increased wear and tear caused by deficient pavements.

Adequate investment in Montana's transportation network will help enhance economic development opportunities, improve business productivity, and make it easier and more reliable for the public to get to and from destinations including work, home, school, shopping and social events.

Population, Travel and Economic Trends in Montana

Montana residents and businesses require a high level of personal and commercial mobility. Population increases and economic growth in the state have resulted in an increase in vehicle miles of travel (VMT) and an increased demand for mobility and connectivity. To foster quality of life and spur continued economic growth, it will be critical that Montana provide an efficient, safe and modern transportation system that can accommodate future growth in population, tourism, business, recreation and vehicle travel.

Montana's population has grown steadily, reaching approximately 1.1 million residents in 2025, a 27 percent increase since 2000.[1] Montana had approximately 879,000 licensed drivers in 2024.[2]

From 2000 to 2024, Montana's gross domestic product (GDP), a measure of the state's economic output, increased by 86 percent when adjusted for inflation – the ninth largest growth in the U.S..[3] U.S. GDP, adjusted for inflation, increased 66 percent during this period.[4]

In 2024, Montana's roads carried 13.9 billion vehicle miles of travel (VMT), a 40 percent increase since 2000 and the seventh largest increase in VMT in the nation during that time.[5]

Pavement Conditions in Montana

The life cycle of Montana's roads is greatly affected by state and local governments' ability to perform timely maintenance and upgrades to ensure that road and highway surfaces last as long as possible.

The pavement data in this report, which is for all arterial and collector roads and highways, is provided by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), based on data submitted annually by MDT on the condition of major state and locally maintained roads and highways. Pavement data for Interstate highways and other principal arterials is collected for all system mileage, whereas pavement data for minor arterial and all collector roads and highways is based on sampling portions of roadways as prescribed by FHWA to ensure the data collected is adequate to provide an accurate assessment of pavement conditions on these roads and highways.

Twelve percent of Montana's major locally and state-maintained roads and highways have pavements rated in poor condition and 19 percent are in mediocre condition.[6] Fifteen percent of Montana's major roads are rated in fair condition and the remaining 54 percent are rated in good condition.[7]

Ten percent of Montana's major locally and state-maintained rural roads and highways have pavements rated in poor condition and 19 percent are in mediocre condition.[8] Fifteen percent of Montana's major rural roads are rated in fair condition and the remaining 56 percent are rated in good condition.[9]

Thirty-six percent of Montana's major locally and state-maintained urban roads and highways have pavements rated in poor condition and 23 percent are in mediocre condition.[10] Thirteen percent of Montana's major urban roads are rated in fair condition and the remaining 28 percent are rated in good condition.[11] The chart below details pavement conditions on major roads in the state's largest urban areas and statewide.[12]

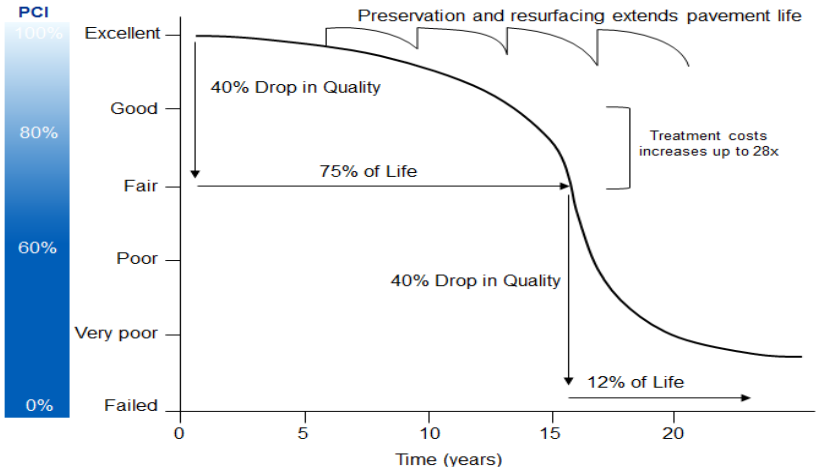
Chart 1. Pavement conditions on major roads in Montana's largest urban areas and statewide.

Location	Poor	Mediocre	Fair	Good
Billings	27%	19%	14%	40%
Great Falls	32%	23%	12%	33%
Missoula	25%	16%	9%	49%
MONTANA STATEWIDE	**12%**	**19%**	**15%**	**54%**

Source: TRIP analysis of Federal Highway Administration data.

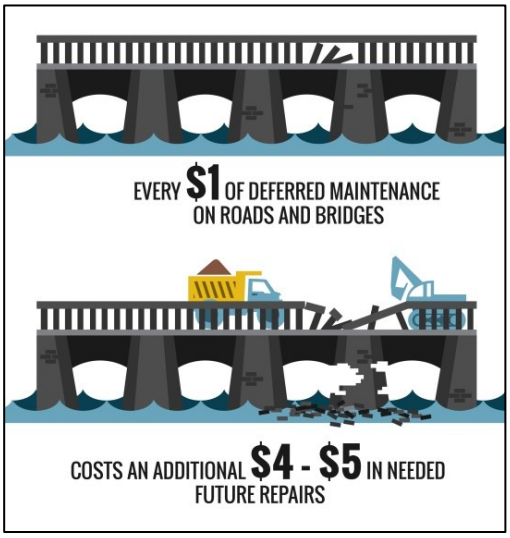
Pavement failure is caused by a combination of traffic, moisture and climate. Moisture often works its way into road surfaces and the materials that form the road's foundation. Road surfaces at intersections are more prone to deterioration because the slow-moving or standing loads occurring at these sites subject the pavement to higher levels of stress. It is critical that roads are fixed before they require major repairs because reconstructing roads costs approximately four times more than resurfacing them.[13] As roads and highways continue to age, they will reach a point of deterioration where routine paving and maintenance will not be adequate to keep pavement surfaces in good condition and costly reconstruction of the roadway and its underlying surfaces will become necessary.

Chart 2. Pavement condition cycle time with treatment and cost



Source: North Carolina Department of Transportation (2016). 2016 Maintenance Operations and Performance Analysis Report

Long-term repair costs increase significantly when road and bridge maintenance is deferred, as road and bridge deterioration accelerates later in the service life of a transportation facility and requires more costly repairs. A report on maintaining pavements found that every $1 of deferred maintenance on roads and bridges costs an additional $4 to $5 in needed future repairs.[14]



The Costs to Motorists of Roads in Inadequate Condition

TRIP has calculated the additional cost to motorists of driving on roads in poor, mediocre or fair condition. When roads are in poor, mediocre or fair condition – which may include potholes, rutting or rough surfaces – the cost to operate and maintain a vehicle increases. These additional vehicle operating costs (VOC) include accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional vehicle repair costs, increased fuel consumption and increased tire wear. TRIP estimates that additional VOC borne by Montana motorists as a result of deteriorated road conditions is $532 million annually, an average of $605 per driver statewide.[15] The chart below shows additional VOC per motorist in the state's largest urban areas.

Chart 3. Vehicle operating costs per motorist and statewide as a result of driving on deteriorated roads.

Location	VOC
Billings	$769
Great Falls	$881
Missoula	$702
Montana per Driver	**$605**
STATEWIDE TOTAL	**$532 Million**

Source: TRIP estimates.

Additional vehicle operating costs have been calculated in the Highway Development and Management Model (HDM), which is recognized by the U.S. Department of Transportation and more than 100 other countries as the definitive analysis of the impact of road conditions on vehicle operating costs. The HDM report is based on numerous studies that have measured the impact of various factors, including road conditions, on vehicle operating costs.[16] The HDM study found that road deterioration increases ownership, repair, fuel and tire costs. The report found that deteriorated roads accelerate the pace of depreciation of vehicles and the need for repairs because the stress on the vehicle increases in proportion to the level of roughness of the pavement surface. Similarly, tire wear and fuel consumption increase as roads deteriorate since there is less efficient transfer of power to the drive train and additional friction between the road and the tires.

TRIP's additional VOC estimate is based on taking the average number of miles driven annually by a motorist, calculating current VOC based on AAA's driving cost estimates and then using the HDM model to estimate the additional VOC paid by drivers as a result of substandard roads.[17] Additional research on the impact of road conditions on fuel consumption by the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) is also factored into TRIP's vehicle operating cost methodology.

Bridge Conditions in Montana

Montana's bridges form key links in the state's highway system, providing communities and individuals access to employment, schools, shopping and medical facilities, and facilitating commerce and access for emergency vehicles.

Seven percent (388 of 5,235) of Montana's locally and state-maintained bridges are rated in poor/structurally deficient condition.[18] This includes all bridges that are 20 feet or more in length. A bridge is deemed poor/structurally deficient if there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components.

Bridges that are poor/structurally deficient may be posted for lower weight limits or closed if their condition warrants such action. Deteriorated bridges can have a significant impact on daily life. Restrictions on vehicle weight may cause many vehicles – especially emergency vehicles, commercial trucks, school buses and farm equipment – to use alternate routes to avoid posted bridges.

Redirected trips also lengthen travel time, waste fuel and reduce the efficiency of the local economy. Sixty percent of Montana's locally and state-maintained bridges have been rated in fair condition.[19] A fair rating indicates that a bridge's structural elements are sound but minor deterioration has occurred to the bridge's deck, substructure or superstructure. The remaining 32 percent of the state's bridges are rated in good condition.[20]

The chart below shows the condition of bridges statewide and in Montana's largest urban areas.[21]

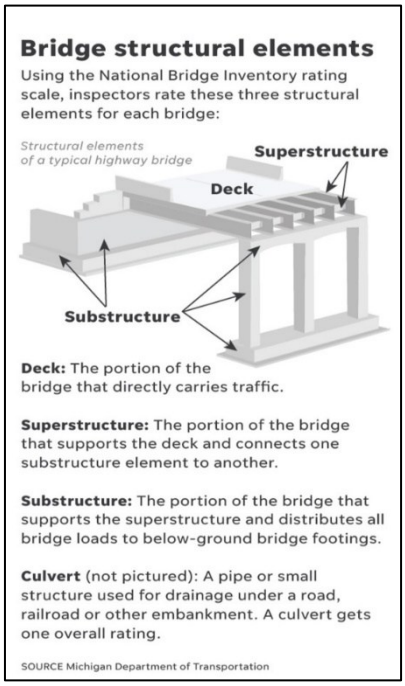


Chart 4. Bridge conditions statewide and in Montana's largest urban areas.

	POOR/STRUCTURALLY DEFICIENT		FAIR		GOOD		TOTAL BRIDGES
	Number	Share	Number	Share	Number	Share	
Billings	7	2%	186	64%	97	33%	290
Great Falls	11	6%	97	52%	77	42%	185
Missoula	15	7%	125	61%	66	32%	206
MONTANA STATEWIDE	**388**	**7%**	**3,165**	**60%**	**1,682**	**32%**	**5,235**

Source: TRIP analysis of Federal Highway Administration National Bridge Inventory (2025).

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 Montana, 39 percent of the state's bridges were built in 1969 or earlier.[22] The service life of bridges can be extended by performing routine maintenance such as resurfacing decks, painting surfaces, ensuring that a facility has good drainage and

replacing deteriorating components. But most bridges will eventually require more costly reconstruction or major rehabilitation to remain operable.

Traffic Safety in Montana

A total of 1,262 people were killed in Montana traffic crashes from 2019 to 2024, an average of 210 fatalities per year.[23] The number of traffic fatalities in Montana began to increase dramatically in 2020 and peaked in 2021, even as vehicle travel plummeted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. While the number of traffic fatalities in the state has fallen in recent years, it is still significantly higher than in 2019. Montana's overall traffic fatality rate of 1.47 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel in 2024 was the seventh highest in the nation and significantly higher than the national average of 1.2.[24]

Chart 5. Montana traffic fatality and VMT data, 2019-2021.

MONTANA TRAFFIC FATALITY DATA						
	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Traffic Fatalities	184	213	239	213	208	205
Fatalities per 100M VMT	1.43	1.76	1.77	1.58	1.50	1.47

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Highway Administration.

The fatality rate on Montana's non-interstate rural roads is nearly two-and-a-half times higher than on all other roads in the state (2.13 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel vs. 0.92).[25] A disproportionate share of fatalities take place on Montana's rural roads: while 49 percent of vehicle travel in the state takes place on rural non-Interstate roads, 69 percent of fatalities occur on rural non-Interstate Montana roads.[26]

The significant increase in traffic fatalities since the onset of the pandemic appears largely related to increased risks being taken by drivers. In an October 2021 report, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that "after the declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, driving patterns and behaviors in the United States changed significantly. Of the drivers who remained on the roads, some engaged in riskier behavior, including speeding, failure to wear seat belts, and driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs."[27]

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAAFTS) drew similar conclusions about the role of increased risks being taken by drivers during the pandemic. A survey taken of drivers in October and November 2020 by the AAAFTS asked whether their level of driving had decreased, remained the same or increased since the beginning of COVID-19 related restrictions, and whether the motorist had engaged in a variety of risky driving behaviors in the previous 30 days.[28] In a February 2022 brief about the survey, the AAAFTS noted that drivers who maintained or increased their pre-COVID travel levels indicated that they were more likely to engage in risky driving behavior, including speeding, not wearing a seat belt, being impaired and driving aggressively. "It is possible that many of the individuals who were willing to travel—and even increase their travel—despite the health risks associated with the pandemic were already more willing than average to take other risks," the AAAFTS report found.[29]

In early 2022 the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted a comprehensive National Roadway Safety Strategy, a roadmap for addressing the nation's roadway safety crisis based on a Safe System approach that acknowledges the following: humans make mistakes and are physically vulnerable; traffic deaths and serious injuries are unacceptable; traffic deaths and serious injuries need to be reduced by the provision of a redundant transportation system that reduces or minimizes crashes and ensures that, if crashes do occur, they do not result in serious injury or death.[30]

Chart 6. The Safe System Approach



Source: US Department of Transportation.

The Safe System approach, which is also being adopted by state and local transportation agencies has five objectives:

- Safer People: Encourage safe, responsible behavior by people who use our roads, and create conditions that prioritize their ability to reach their destination unharmed.
- Safer Roads: Design roadway environments to mitigate human mistakes and account for injury tolerances, to encourage safer behaviors, and to facilitate safe travel by the most vulnerable users.
- Safer Vehicles: Expand the availability of vehicle systems and features that help to prevent crashes and minimize the impact of crashes on both occupants and non-occupants.
- Safer Speeds: Promote safer speeds in all roadway environments through a combination of thoughtful, context-appropriate roadway design, targeted education and outreach campaigns, and enforcement.
- Post-Crash Care: Enhance the survivability of crashes through expedient access to emergency medical care, while creating a safe working environment for vital first responders and preventing secondary crashes through robust traffic incident management practices.

Improving safety on the nation's roadways will require that additional steps are taken to make further progress in achieving the Safe System's objectives. NHTSA, which provides states with roadway safety grants, requires states to submit annually a state highway safety plan. The state plans outline numerous steps states are taking to improve traffic safety. Elements of these state roadway safety plans aimed at addressing the Safe System objectives include:

- Safer People: education on speeding, impaired or disadvantaged driving; education on safe pedestrian and bicycling behavior; education on driving safely around large commercial vehicles; enforcement of commercial driver license and vehicle weight requirements; extension of safety belt laws and their enforcement to include all passenger vehicle occupants; enhancing enforcement action of speeding, impaired, aggressive and distracted driving, particularly at high-risk locations; increase penalties, particularly for repeat offender drivers; and increased enforcement at work zones.

- Safer Roads: converting intersections to roundabouts; removing or shielding roadside objects; the addition of left-turn lanes at intersections; improved signalization and lighting at intersections; adding or improving median barriers; improved roadway lighting; adding centerline or shoulder rumble strips; improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities, including sidewalks and bike lanes and providing pedestrian crossing islands; improved work zone safety measures; wider lanes and paved shoulders; upgrading roads from two lanes to four lanes; providing or improving lane markings; updating rail crossings; eliminating vertical pavement drop-offs; and providing large truck parking spaces.
- Safer Vehicles: Support the development, testing and deployment of connected and autonomous vehicle technology such as collision avoidance, lane departure avoidance systems and turning detection systems.
- Safer Speeds: Where appropriate, provide roadway features to encourage safer speeds, including traffic roundabouts and curb extensions; improved signage and dynamic speed signing at high-risk locations; education on the consequences of speeding; and increased speeding enforcement, particularly at high-risk locations.
- Post-Crash Care: Reduce crash response time including the use of emergency vehicle preemption technology; improve emergency response to multi-vehicle or hazardous material crashes; and increase access to level one or two trauma centers for seriously-injured crash victims.

Three major factors are associated with fatal vehicle crashes: driver behavior, vehicle characteristics and roadway features. Roadway features that impact safety include the number of lanes, lane widths, lighting, lane markings, rumble strips, shoulders, guard rails, other shielding devices, median barriers and intersection design.

Traffic crashes in Montana imposed a total of $1.5 billion in economic costs in 2024.[31] 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 $500 million in economic costs in Montana in 2024.[32]

According to a 2023 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report, the tangible economic costs of traffic crashes include medical care, lost productivity, legal and court costs, insurance administrative costs, workplace costs, congestion impacts (travel delay, excess fuel consumption and pollution), emergency services, and property damage. NHTSA has also estimated the annual value of the lost quality-of-life cost of traffic crashes causing serious injury or death. The lost quality-of-life costs include the loss of remaining lifespan, extended or lifelong physical impairment, or physical pain.

Congestion and Travel Reliability in Montana

Congested roads, highways and bottlenecks choke commuting and commerce and keep Montana residents and visitors from efficiently getting to their destination. From 2000 to 2024, vehicle travel in Montana increased by 40 percent – the seventh largest increase in the U.S. during that time.[33]

While traffic congestion is largely constrained to the state's urban areas, a lack of reliability on some of Montana's major highways and roads hampers the state's ability to support economic development and quality of life by reducing the reliability and efficiency of commercial, personal and recreational travel, including the transport of goods and services. Traffic congestion costs commuters of time and money and imposes increased costs on businesses, shippers and manufacturers, which are often passed along to consumers. Increased levels of congestion can also reduce the attractiveness of a location when a company is considering expansion or deciding where to locate a new facility.

The chart below details the number of annual hours lost to congestion, cost of lost time and wasted fuel and gallons of fuel wasted per driver in the state's largest urban areas.[34]

Chart 7. Annual per-driver hours lost to congestion, congestion cost in lost time and wasted fuel, and gallons of fuel wasted in congestion.

Location	Hours Lost to Congestion	Annual Cost	Gallons of Fuel Wasted
Billings	29	$468	6
Great Falls	21	$328	4
Missoula	41	$680	9

Source: Texas Transportation Institute Urban Mobility Report, 2025.

Transportation Challenges and Funding in Montana

Investment in Montana's roads, highways and bridges is funded by local, state and federal governments. A lack of sufficient funding at all levels will make it difficult to adequately maintain and improve the state's existing transportation system.

Montana faces significant challenges on many of the state's most critical transportation routes, including the need to add capacity to support economic development, to improve roadway safety and to address pavement and bridge deterioration. The Montana Department of Transportation has identified the state's top transportation challenges. Based on these challenges identified by MTD, TRIP has ranked Montana's top transportation challenges.[35]

1. **Montana's Aging Bridges: A Growing Challenge:** Across Montana, hundreds of bridges are posted with weight limits. Many of these are older timber bridges that are nearing the end of their useful life. These restrictions create major challenges for commercial trucking and agriculture, making it harder to move goods from farms to markets efficiently. Addressing these aging bridges is essential to keep Montana's economy moving and ensure safe travel for everyone.

2. **US 191 – Four Corners to MT 64:** A corridor study outlined over $350 Million of needed improvements. However, the design options are restricted given the topography along the corridor. The corridor experiences seasonal traffic queueing and congestion. Projects that are being designed or constructed along this corridor now include Big Sky – North; Spanish Creek – Gallatin Canyon; and Passing Lanes – Gallatin Canyon.

3. **Statewide Culverts**: A multitude of large and small culverts across the state are in need of replacement due to their age and poor condition. A combination of bundled and site specific projects are anticipated to address culverts identified through MDT's asset management program.

4. **Interstate 90 – Billings Area**: Additional capacity is needed in the Billings area along with new interchanges at Lockwood Interchange and Johnson Lane Interchange. Major projects in this area are currently being constructed and designed, including Lockwood Interchange and Johnson Lane Interchange (BBP); and recently completed projects include I-90 Yellowstone River and Mossmain-W. Billings Interchange.

5. **Highway 212 Safety Improvement and Capacity:** MDT will be initiating safety and capacity improvement projects on Hwy 212. These projects will include passing lanes between Busby and Lame Deer; passing lanes

at Ashland Flats; shoulder widening, possibly passing lanes, and pavement preservation work between Broadus and Alzada.

6. **Interstate 90 – Idaho to St. Regis:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from the Idaho border to St. Regis. Several projects are currently being designed or have recently been constructed along this section of I-90. Taft – West, a concrete paving project now complete. Lookout Pass – East and Saltese – East slated for construction beginning in 2026. Projects currently in design include: Taft – Saltese; DeBorgia – E&W; and I-90 Bridge Rehab needed throughout corridor.

7. **Interstate 90 – Hardin to Wyoming:** Due to the age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from Hardin to the border with Wyoming. Several pavement preservation projects are designed on this section of I-90. These projects are Wyoming Line-North, Dunmore-East, and Crow Agency-Garryowen. MDT recently completed a project on I-90 in the vicinity of Toluca due to subsurface movement that has dramatically reduced the condition of the roadway. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor.

8. **Interstate 15 – Great Falls to Sweetgrass:** Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor, along with improvements to address a lack of interchange capacity and roadway deterioration.

9. **Interstate 94 – Forsyth to North Dakota**: Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from Miles City to the border with North Dakota. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor, and several pavement preservation projects are currently being designed. Completed or under construction include Colstrip Interchange– West; Bridge Decks West of Forsyth; Broadus Interchange – Miles City; Bridge Decks Miles City Area; Bridge Decks Terry – Fallon; Bad Route Interchange SW; Bad Route Interchange NE; Bridge Rehab – Circle Interchange; and East of Glendive East. Pavement preservation and culvert rehab projects in development include West of Hathaway – West; Miles City – West; Powder River – West; Glendive East and West; Bridge Deck – Glendive Area; Hodges Interchange – East; Wibaux East and West; and culvert rehab in the Glendive and Miles City areas.

10. **Interstate 90 – Bozeman:** Capacity improvements are needed to address capacity and performance issues between Three Forks and Rocky Canyon. Rocky Canyon (I-90) was constructed this year. Interchange improvements have been recently completed at the 19th Street Interchange. Belgrade – Bozeman resurfacing has been awarded and will be constructed in 2026. Three Forks Area Bridge Decks was also recently awarded and will be constructed in 2026 as well.

11. **Interstate 15 – Helena to Great Falls:** Improvements needed to address interchange capacity and roadway deterioration. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor. Terrain constraints limit options at Wolf Creek Canyon. The Wolf Creek N&S major rehab project is now complete. The Seiben Interchange North project will begin the Summer of 2026 and will also be a major rehab.

12. **Billings Bypass:** Three of seven segments of the Billings Bypass are complete, and the next segment is scheduled for letting in 2026. Two additional segments are currently being designed and in the right of way phase.

13. **US 93 – Polson to Whitefish:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from the border with Polson to Whitefish, along with bridge replacements and deck treatments. Pavement rehabilitation is needed due to age and condition of the pavement.

14. **US 93 – Idaho to Hamilton:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from the border with Idaho to Hamilton, along with bridge replacements and deck treatments. Pavement rehabilitation is needed due to age and condition of the pavement. A project to reconstruct a portion of the corridor south of Connor is currently being designed, along with several pavement preservation projects.

15. **US 93 – Missoula to Polson:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from bottom of Evaro Hill to Polson, along with bridge replacements and deck treatments. Pavement rehabilitation is needed due to age and condition of the pavement.

16. **US 2 – Kalispell to East Glacier:** Due to age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from Kalispel to East Glacier. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor. Several pavement preservation projects are being designed for this section of US 2.

17. **Interstate 90 –St. Regis to Missoula:** Due to the age and condition of the pavement, rehabilitation is needed from St. Regis to Missoula. Additional pavement preservation projects on this section of the I-90 are being considered. Bridge replacements and deck treatments are needed throughout the corridor.

18. **MT - 13 Wolf Point to Scobey:** Multiple reconstruction projects are in development and needed to bring the roadway to current design standards.

19. **US 12 Lewis & Clark County:** Improvements are needed to address capacity issues and deterioration in Lewis and Clark County from the Broadwater County line to the Powell County line.

20. **US 191 Malta to Mobridge:** A segment of this roadway near Mobridge is currently under construction due to re-occurring landslides. There are two smaller landslides that are impacting the road that will be addressed with a construction project. Additionally, there are multiple reconstruction projects are in development between DY Junction and Malta that are needed to bring the roadway to current design standards.

21. **US 87 Great Falls to Lewistown:** Improvements are needed to enhance capacity, reduce hazards and address deterioration southeast of Armington Junction to Raynesford. The Central Montana Transportation Study is a comprehensive study of the corridor from Great Falls to Lewistown along US 87. This study will be used as a baseline to determine needs for the corridor with increased usage from MAFB in conjunction with the Sentinel Project.

22. **1st Avenue North – Billings:** MDT is currently designing three phases of reconstruction projects in Downtown Billings to address poor roadway conditions and substandard roadway features including curb, gutter and sidewalk, lighting, and signal operations.

23. **Exposition Drive and 1st Avenue North Intersection Improvements:** This project is currently being designed and when complete, will improve traffic operations, enhance safety, and address reoccurring flooding in Downtown Billings.

24. MT - 7 Ekalaka to Baker: Multiple reconstruction projects are in development and needed to bring the roadway to current design standards.

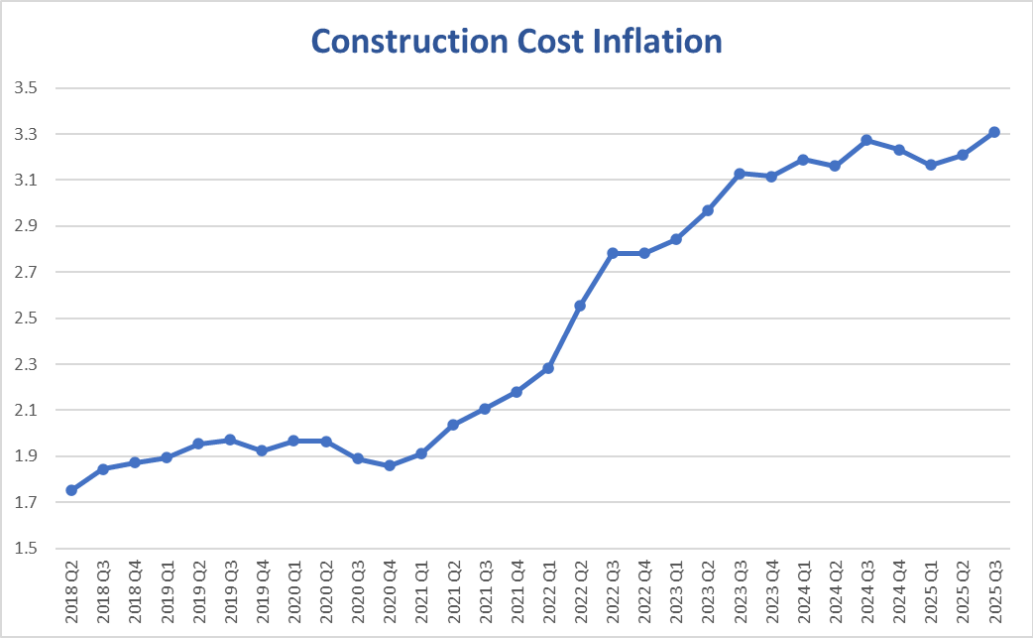
In addition to state funds, the federal government is a critical source of funding for Montana's roads, highways, bridges and transit systems and provides a significant return in road and bridge funding based on the revenue generated in the state by the federal motor fuel tax. Most federal funds for highway and transit improvements in Montana are provided by federal highway user fees, largely an 18.4 cents-per-gallon tax on gasoline and a 24.4 cents-per-gallon tax on diesel fuel. The federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), signed into law on November 2021, provides $2.8 billion in federal funds to the state for highway and bridge investments in Montana over five years, representing a 26 percent increase in annual federal funding for roads and bridges in the state over the previous federal surface transportation program.[36]

Increasing vehicle fuel efficiency, wider adoption of electric and hybrid vehicles and inflation in highway construction costs will hamper the ability of revenue from state and federal motor fuel taxes and other sources of state and federal transportation funding to keep pace with the state's transportation needs.

In the first quarter of 2025, hybrid vehicles, plug-in hybrid electric vehicles, and battery electric vehicles made up approximately 22 percent of total new light-duty vehicle sales in the U.S.[37] The average fuel efficiency of U.S. passenger vehicles increased from 20 miles per gallon in 2010 to 24.5 miles per gallon in 2020. Average fuel efficiency is expected to increase another 31 percent by 2030, to 32 miles per gallon, and increase 51 percent by 2040, to 37 miles per gallon.[38]

Increasing inflation has also hampered Montana'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 52 percent from the beginning of 2022 through the third quarter of 2025. [39]

Chart 8. FHWA's national highway construction cost index.



Source: Federal Highway Administration.

The Importance of Transportation to Economic Growth in Montana

Investments in transportation improvements in Montana play a critical role in the state's economy. A report by the American Road & Transportation Builders Association found that the design, construction and maintenance of transportation infrastructure supports the equivalent of approximately 17,000 full-time jobs across all sectors of the state economy, earning these workers approximately $586 million annually.[40] These jobs include approximately 8,000 full-time jobs directly involved in transportation infrastructure construction and related activities. Spending by employees and companies in the transportation design and construction industry supports an additional 9,000 full-time jobs in Montana.[41] Transportation construction in Montana contributes an estimated $107 million annually in state and local income, corporate and unemployment insurance taxes and the federal payroll tax.[42]

Approximately 214,000 full-time jobs in Montana in key industries like tourism, retail sales, agriculture and manufacturing are dependent on the quality, safety and reliability of the state's transportation infrastructure network. These workers earn approximately $7.3 billion in wages and contribute an estimated $1.3 billion in state and local income, corporate and unemployment insurance taxes and the federal payroll tax.[43]

Local, regional and state economic performance is improved when a region's surface transportation system is expanded or repaired. This improvement comes as a result of the initial job creation and increased employment created over the long-term because of improved access, reduced transport costs and improved safety.

Freight Transportation in Montana

Today's culture of business demands that an area has well-maintained and efficient roads, highways and bridges if it is to remain economically competitive. Global communications and the impact of free trade in North America and elsewhere have resulted in a significant increase in freight movement, making the quality of a region's transportation system, including its highways, railroads, air and maritime ports, a key component in a business's ability to compete locally, nationally and internationally.

Businesses have responded to improved communications and the need to cut costs with a variety of innovations including just-in-time delivery, increased small package delivery, demand-side inventory management and e-commerce. The result of these changes has been a significant improvement in logistics efficiency as firms move from a push-style distribution system, which relies on large-scale warehousing of materials, to a pull-style distribution system, which relies on smaller, more strategic movement of goods. These improvements have made mobile inventories the norm, resulting in the nation's trucks literally becoming rolling warehouses.

Highways are vitally important to continued economic development in Montana. As the economy expands, creating more jobs and increasing consumer confidence, the demand for consumer and business products grows. In turn, manufacturers ship greater quantities of goods to market to meet this demand, a process that adds to truck traffic on the state's highways and major arterial roads.

The amount of freight transported in Montana and the rest of the U.S. is expected to increase significantly as a result of further economic growth, changing business and retail models, increasing international trade, and rapidly changing consumer expectations that place an emphasis on faster deliveries, often of smaller packages or payloads.

In 2024 Montana's freight system moved 164 million tons of freight, valued at $83 billion.[44] From 2024 to 2050, freight moved annually in Montana by trucks is expected to increase 59 percent by weight and 89 percent by value (inflation-adjusted dollars).[45] This anticipated growth in freight transport in Montana, and the rest of the U.S., is a result of further economic growth, changing business and retail models,

increasing international trade, and rapidly changing consumer expectations that place an emphasis on faster deliveries, often of smaller packages or payloads.

The need to improve the U.S. freight network is occurring at a time when the nation's freight delivery system is being transformed by advances in vehicle autonomy, manufacturing, warehousing and supply chain automation, increasing e-commerce, and the growing logistic networks being developed by Amazon and other retail organizations in response to the demand for a faster and more responsive delivery and logistics cycle.

Improving Transportation Safety, Resiliency and Efficiency

Recognizing that extreme weather, sea level change, and changes in environmental conditions may threaten the condition and longevity of the nation's transportation infrastructure, transportation agencies have begun to assess vulnerabilities and consider the resilience of their transportation assets during the transportation planning process. Transportation agencies across the country have begun to incorporate resilience in asset management plans, addressing resilience in project development and design and optimizing operations and maintenance practices.[46]

Based on the importance of maximizing the level and safety of mobility provided by its transportation system, transportation agencies are adopting Transportation Systems Management and Operations (TSMO) practices and incorporating improved resiliency into their transportation network. While a TSMO program does not eliminate the need for capacity expansions along some routes, it helps enhance the mobility of an existing corridor as much as possible.

A TSMO program adopts an integrated set of strategies to improve traffic flow and safety on a portion of a roadway, including work zone management, traffic incident management, freight management, traveler information, traffic signal coordination, ramp management, transit management and improved bicycle and pedestrian crossings.[47] The benefits of TSMO can include reduced traffic congestion, reduced fuel consumption and reduced emissions.

MDT is implementing TSMO practices, which include the following: the implementation of a Transportation Management Center, which provides traveler information, including variable message signs regarding non-recurring congestion; the implementation of advanced traffic signal performance measures that will address non-recurring congestion by improving traffic signal reliability and addressing recurring congestion by providing information to allow the retiming of traffic signals.[48]

Conclusion

As Montana strives to support ongoing population and economic growth, it is critical that the state can provide a well-maintained, safe, and efficient 21st-century network of roads, highways, bridges, and transit to accommodate the mobility demands of modern society. In order to continue to provide needed improvements, the state will need to make further increases in its level of transportation investment.

A safe and reliable transportation system that is maintained in good condition and offers improved mobility and accessibility to meet the needs of Montana residents, businesses, and tourists alike, is critical to moving Montana forward.

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