

FLORIDA

TRANSPORTATION BUILDER



Building America: 250 Years on the Road



2026 Convention:
Red, White & Road Ready
in Palm Beach

America's Interstates
at 70: What it Will Take
to Keep Them Moving

Plus: Fleet Strategy,
Work Zone Safety, AI
in Transportation & More

America's Interstate Highway System at 70: Rebuilding the Backbone of a Nation

By Lisa Mead

Initiated by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Interstate highway system is widely considered one of the greatest public works projects in the 250 years of United States history. For the construction industry, it represented an unprecedented era of standardized road building, requiring all routes to be freeways with at least four lanes, controlled access and no at-grade crossings.

When signing the legislation in 1956, Eisenhower remarked, "Our highways badly need modernization and expansion to accommodate today's vastly increased motor traffic." Seventy years later, that statement still rings just as true.

With an original authorization of \$25 billion – equivalent to \$300 billion today – for

the construction of 41,000 miles of the Interstate Highway System over a 10-year period, it was the largest public works project through that period. The act was motivated by the need for efficient transportation for commerce and defense. What followed reshaped how Americans lived, worked and traveled – connecting cities, accelerating commerce and turning the open road into a symbol of mobility and freedom.

Florida's first interstate highway project was a section of Interstate 4 (I-4), which began construction in 1958 and officially opened to traffic on July 7, 1961. The inaugural 15-mile stretch connected Plant City and Lakeland.

"When America built the Interstate Highway System, it built more than pavement it built the framework for economic growth,"

said Nikki Terlesky, Director of Operations for The Historic Route 66 Association of Arizona headquartered in Kingman, Arizona. "National mobility increased, and the freedom of the open road that Route 66 came to symbolize for generations was now open to more people."

While the original estimate for the system was \$25 billion over 12 years, the massive construction undertaking ultimately spanned 35 years and cost approximately \$114 billion, or \$937 billion in 2026 dollars.

The Interstate Highway System remains the workhorse of the U.S. transportation system: heavily traveled and providing the most important link in the nation's supply chain, and the primary connection between and within urban communities. Today, the sprawling network spans 48,890 miles



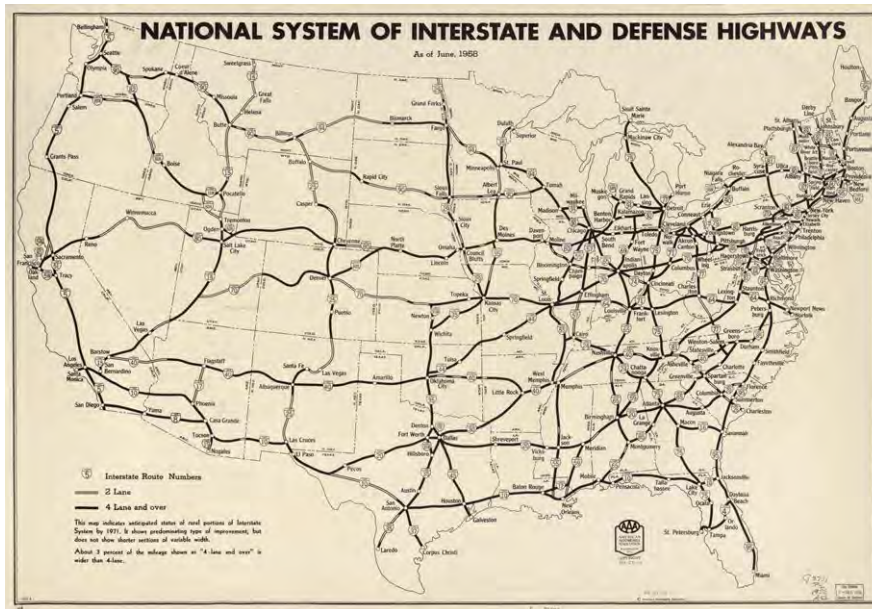
Key Takeaways

- ★ The Interstate Highway System turns 70. This 48,890-mile network took 35 years and \$937 billion (in today's dollars) to build.
- ★ Interstates carry 24% of all U.S. vehicle travel on just 2.6% of roadway miles, generating \$65 billion in annual economic benefits.
- ★ Infrastructure is reaching a crisis point. 11% of pavements are rated poor or mediocre, and 3% of bridges are structurally deficient.
- ★ Annual investment must more than double, from \$23 billion to \$57 billion per year, to address the backlog.
- ★ The system saves nearly 7,000 lives, 369 million gallons of fuel and 1.3 billion travel hours each year – all at risk without urgent action.
- ★ A massive rebuild is in the works. 15,000 interchanges, added lane capacity, network expansion and new financing models like public-private partnerships and toll facilities are all on the table.



"The Interstate Highway System is more than concrete and steel – it is a living symbol of American ambition, ingenuity and unity. Built by a generation that believed in creating something bigger than themselves, these roads connected families, fueled commerce, strengthened national defense and opened the country to endless opportunities."

— Dave Kearby, Executive Director, TRIP



National system of interstate and defense highways as of June 1958.

and serves as the main arteries for much of America.

According to a report released in June by the non-profit TRIP (www.tripnet.org), the economic benefit of the Interstate Highway System is \$65 billion dollars annually, considering fuel savings, road safety improvements and congestion reduction. However, America's interstate highways are wearing out and showing signs of their advanced age, often heavily congested and in need of significant reconstruction, modernization and expansion. At 70 years old, the Interstate Highway System is deteriorating, its traffic load of cars and trucks continues to increase, and the system lacks an adequate plan for its long-term health.

"As builders, we've always understood that infrastructure does more than connect places; it connects people, strengthens communities, supports businesses and creates the foundation for economic growth," said Vince Hafeli, D.B.A., President of Ajax Paving Industries of Florida and TRIP board member. Every road we create represents

opportunity, progress and a commitment to the people who depend on them every day."

According to TRIP's 2026 American Highways Report, interstate highways carry 24% of all vehicle travel despite making up only 2.6% of the nation's roadway lane miles.

"Nearly seven decades after the interstate system transformed how America moves, we face a defining moment for transportation infrastructure," said Dan Hurtado, FTBA President and TRIP board member. "Aging systems, increasing freight demands and unprecedented population growth require more than maintenance – they demand innovation. The future of transportation depends on our ability to modernize these critical networks, ensuring they remain safe, resilient and capable of supporting economic growth for generations to come."

Now approaching its 70th birthday, the system is showing severe signs of aging, presenting an immense challenge for heavy civil contractors, engineers and those who support the industry. The Interstate Highway System saved 6,990 lives in 2024, ac-

cording to the TRIP report, but this continued impact is in jeopardy from crumbling and aging infrastructure.

A critical issue for modern roadbuilders is that most interstate segments still retain their original underlying foundations. Consequently, repeated pavement resurfacing yields diminishing returns, resulting in higher lifecycle costs and increasingly shorter periods of pavement smoothness. According to TRIP, 11% of interstate pavements are already rated in poor or mediocre condition. Furthermore, the system's structures are aging past their intended design life; the average age of an interstate bridge is 46 years, with 54% being at least 50 years old and 3% currently rated as poor or structurally deficient.

The Interstate Highway System revolutionized how America moves people and goods, fueling economic growth and transforming mobility across the country. But nearly 70 years later, much of that infrastructure still relies on foundations built decades ago. The next generation of transportation investment must go beyond short-term repairs and focus on rebuilding, modernizing and creating resilient infrastructure capable of supporting the demands of a growing and evolving nation.

The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates a staggering \$196 billion backlog in necessary improvements, which includes \$58 billion needed for pavements, \$65 billion for bridges and \$73 billion for system expansion and enhancements. The Transportation Research Board (TRB) has indicated that addressing these massive physical and operational deficiencies will require annual investments to more than double, increasing from \$23 billion in 2018 to \$57 billion annually over the next 20 years. For contractors, this mandates a massive up-



I-95 in Brevard County shows the wooded median and roadside areas preserved by the Florida Department of Transportation. Photo taken by FDOT.

coming pipeline of work dedicated to rebuilding aging foundations, upgrading outdated interchanges and adding capacity to meet 21st-century demands.

Looking ahead, the modernization of the Interstate Highway System presents a multifaceted pipeline of specialized work for the heavy civil construction sector. Beyond simply replacing aging pavements, contractors will be tasked with completely upgrading most of the system's roughly 15,000 interchanges, which are currently a primary source of traffic bottlenecks and whose immense reconstruction costs are not even fully captured in current federal funding estimates.

Modernizing the network will also require "right-sizing" the system, which includes adding necessary lane capacity to existing corridors and comprehensively overhauling safety features. According to the TRIP analysis, 369 million gallons of fuel are saved annually by the Interstate Highway System, and this will only continue to be a benefit as capacity is adjusted to meet the growing populations that live near and use the system.

In addition to rebuilding the existing network, the future of the highway system includes significant geographic expansion through congressionally designated high-priority corridors, ensuring long-term project opportunities for the construction industry. Forward-thinking expansion is critical

for accommodating long-term demographic and economic shifts; by the year 2060, counties located within 20 miles of an interstate are projected to grow in population at a rate roughly seven times faster than those located further away.

To finance these massive future undertakings, the construction industry will likely see an increased reliance on innovative funding mechanisms, including public-private partnerships, the construction of new toll facilities and the addition of high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes to highly congested freeways. These creative solutions will result in continued savings for road users in the form of hours spent in traffic, on top of the 1.3 billion hours saved, as calculated by TRIP.

Upon releasing the report, TRIP Executive Director Dave Kearby said, "The Interstate Highway System is more than concrete and steel – it is a living symbol of American ambition, ingenuity and unity. Built by a generation that believed in creating something bigger than themselves, these roads connected families, fueled commerce, strengthened national defense and opened the country to endless opportunities. As we approach its 70th anniversary and America's 250th, rebuilding this system is not just an investment in infrastructure – it is a chance to honor that legacy and ensure future generations inherit an America that still believes in building boldly for tomorrow."

Looking back on his presidency, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower described the Interstate Highway System as "more than any single action by the government since the end of the war, this one would change the face of America." Nearly 70 years later, those words continue to hold true. The impact of the interstate system extends far beyond transportation; it reshaped communities, accelerated economic growth, connected regions and influenced the social and cultural fabric of American life throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

Lisa Mead is Marketing and Partnership Director for TRIP. Founded in 1971, TRIP is a private, nonprofit organization that conducts research, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues. The organization works with industry partners such as AGC of America to release reports at the state and national level. To read the full report, visit tripnet.org/reports/americas-interstate-highway-system-at-70-2026.



I-4 in Orange County, America to Washington Street in Orlando showing Municipal Parking Area under the large structure on the recently opened project. 7-19-62.