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TRANSPORTATION

States reach a crossroads as interstate highway system turns 70

A new report found it is showing its age, 'suffering from severe wear and escalating congestion.'

Austin Jenkins 06:00 AM, Jun 29, 2026

The nation's interstate highway system turns 70 on Monday, as suspense builds over whether Congress will reau a key transportation funding law and uncertainty grows in states about how to maintain aging roads and bridges

President Dwight Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 on June 29, launching a decades-long construction spree. The result was a network of safer, faster multi-lane highways criss-crossing the country totali more than 45,000 miles. Drivers were no longer limited to slower and often dangerous two-lane roads.

The federal government contributed 90% of the nearly $130 billion it cost to build the original interstate system. states own and operate the interstates and are responsible for maintaining them.

At 70, the system is showing its age.

A new report from TRIP, a transportation research nonprofit backed by a coalition of manufacturing, insurance, construction, labor and engineering organizations, concluded that the interstate system provides $65 billion in a benefits but is also "suffering from severe wear and escalating congestion."

America's interstate highways have become the backbone of the nation's transportation system — carrying 24% of the traffic and 57% of large commercial truck trips as of 2024.

"Most roadway segments of the Interstate Highway System retain their original underlying foundations and need to be completely rebuilt from the subbase up," according to the report, which was issued to coincide with the 70th anniversary.

Pavement on 11% of interstate highways is in poor or mediocre condition and 3% of interstate bridges are structurally deficient, the report found. Hawaii, Louisiana and Colorado have the highest percentage of poor pavement, while West Virginia and New York have the most deficient bridges.

The report pegged the backlog of needed maintenance nationally at $196 billion — $58 billion for pavement improvements, $65 billion for bridges and $73 billion for expansion and enhancement.

"It is time to renew Eisenhower's vision for a safe, efficient means of moving long-distance traffic by investing in an Interstate Highway System that meets the needs of the next seven decades and beyond," Chris Spear, president and CEO of the American Trucking Association, said in a statement accompanying the TRIP report.

An example of the decay is the Interstate 5 Ship Canal Bridge in Seattle, which was built in the 1960s and carries an average of 240,000 vehicles a day.

The Washington Department of Transportation is in the midst of a months-long, $178 million "Revive I-5" project to preserve the bridge, which has "significant deterioration" and has needed more than 200 emergency repairs in recent years.

Funding for the preservation work is coming from the state and from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021, which gave states a $350 billion boost for roads and bridges

Democratic Rep. Jake Fey, chair of the Washington House Transportation Committee, said he appreciates the federal dollars, but they represent a fraction of the money spent to maintain aging transportation infrastructure in the state.

"We're not in a great place, especially for a growing state," Fey said.

Since 2003, Washington state lawmakers have approved a series of multi-year transportation funding packages. The state also has one of the highest gas taxes in the nation, which will go up another 1.1 cents to 56.5 cents a gallon on July 1. Even so, the state's anticipated transportation revenues are falling below forecast as the cost of projects goes up.

Future federal funding is also up in the air.

The 2021 law expires on Sept. 30, and Congress has yet to approve the next surface transportation spending bill. A bipartisan bill called the BUILD America 250 Act was passed out of committee in May; it would authorize $580 billion in spending over the next five years.

The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials is among the groups pushing for reauthorization. Russell McMurry, commissioner of the Georgia Department of Transportation and AASHTO's cur president, told a congressional committee in February that "our nation still faces significant and growing transpo needs for improved safety and mobility for driving economic success."

Congress also has not raised the federal gas tax since 1993. The federal Highway Trust Fund — a key funding sou faces insolvency by 2028.

The Bipartisan Policy Center has recommended that Congress index the gas tax to inflation. Others want to end t program. The BUILD America 250 Act would provide $473.8 billion via the Highway Trust Fund while imposing ar registration fees on electric and hybrid vehicles.

Gas taxes have become a less reliable transportation funding source as cars get more efficient and more drivers electric vehicles. Some states are moving toward a pay-by-the-mile approach to funding roads, but widespread adoption is still years off.

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The TRIP report calls for "strong federal leadership" and "robust state-federal partnerships" to reconstruct and "right-size" the interstate highway system.

Other groups have a different perspective, saying the "highway lobby" is keeping America car-dependent at the expense of a wider array of transportation options.

An April report from Transportation for America and Taxpayers for Common Sense criticized the results of $1.5 trillion in federal transportation spending over 30 years, and said states should be required to fix roads before expanding them.

"Congress authorized $56.8 billion from the Highway Trust Fund in FY2024, more than enough to fix every poor road on the federal-aid system," Steve Ellis, president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, said in a statement accompanying the report. "Yet conditions have barely moved in decades. That's because there are no enforceable requirements to actually spend that money on repair first."

The report recommended that Congress tie federal funding to "measurable improvements" in road conditions, prioritize repair of existing roads and improve transparency in how money is spent.

But as populations grow and traffic gridlocks, the pressure to build, not just repair, is strong.

Missouri, dubbed the "birthplace to the interstate," offers a prime example. The Missouri Department of Transportation is rebuilding 200 miles of I-70. A key element of the state-funded, $2.8 billion project is adding a third lane of travel in each direction between Kansas City and St. Louis.

Its goal is to finish the interstate widening by the end of 2030.

"We're currently in the middle of really what I would call a generational improvement to this interstate," Ed Hassinger, MoDOT's commissioner, said in a TRIP virtual news conference last week. "... This year, [I]-70 is going to turn 70, and it's kind of outstretched its useful life — not only in condition but how it operates."