

# 70 Years on the Open Road

Why America's highway system  
needs an upgrade



**I**nitiated 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 U.S. 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, the president 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 today.

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 first project initiated under the new act was on Mark Twain Expressway (Interstate 70) in St. Charles County, Missouri, the same year the act was signed.

“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, 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 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](http://www.tripnet.org)), the economic benefit of the Interstate Highway System is \$65 billion 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 Americans, we’ve always understood that roads do more than move people – they connect communities, support our farmers and businesses, and keep America’s economy moving,” said Don Weaver, president and chief executive officer, Weaver-Bailey Contractors, Inc., vice president, AGC of America, and former TRIP chairman.

“The system helped shape modern roadways throughout the country, and investing in its future means preserving opportunities for the next generation.”

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

“Nearly 70 years after construction began, America’s Interstate System stands at a crossroads, challenged by aging

foundations, growing freight demands, and traffic volumes never imagined at its inception,” said Joe Hall, president, Armstrong Steel Erectors, Inc., an Ohio Contractors Member, and board member, AGC of America.

“The next era of transportation will not simply preserve these historic roadways but reimagine and modernize them to carry the nation safely and efficiently into the 21st century.”

Hall sees this need as a young AGC leader and knows the value in reports issued by organizations like TRIP and education efforts conducted by AGC of America in our nation’s capital.

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 according 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

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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 transformed America’s economy and mobility, but 70 years later, we’re confronting the reality that much of this infrastructure is still resting on foundations built in the 1950s and 1960s,” said Bob Lanham, AGC of America’s 2020-21 president, former TRIP board of directors chairman, and president, Williams Brothers Construction. “The next era of transportation investment can’t be about temporary fixes; it must focus on full-scale reconstruction, modernization, and long-term resilience to meet the demands of a growing 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 upcoming 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 multi-faceted 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. Three-hundred sixty-nine million gallons of fuel are saved annually by the Interstate Highway System according to the TRIP analysis, 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.”

Reflecting on his two terms in office, former President Dwight D. Eisenhower once said of the Interstate Highway System, “More than any single action by the government since the end of the war, this one would change the face of America.” Seven decades later, that prediction still resonates. The Highway Interstate System impact is undeniable. Beyond reshaping the physical landscape, the vast network of highways accelerated social, economic, and cultural changes that transformed American life throughout the second half of the 20th century. ■

***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.***

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## America’s Moving Forward

### AGC launches national campaign to support long-term highway and transit funding

**WITH THE CURRENT** federal surface transportation law set to expire on September 30, 2026, AGC of America has launched a nationwide advocacy campaign aimed at keeping highway and transit investment on track — and on time.

The campaign, titled *America’s Moving Forward*, is designed to build public and congressional support for passage of the next federal surface transportation bill before the current authorization lapses. AGC leaders say timely action is critical to sustaining economic growth and job creation in communities across the country.

“Improving highways and transportation systems makes it easier for companies to thrive and expand by lowering shipping costs, accelerating deliveries, and connecting firms to clients and investors,” said Ken Simonson, AGC’s chief economist. “But without a long-term transportation bill in place, it is hard to see how most areas will be able to sustain the kind of job growth they have experienced since 2020.”

Unlike traditional advocacy efforts centered on Washington, D.C., America’s Moving Forward is built to meet people where they already consume information — online. The campaign uses targeted digital and social media advertising to reach voters in key congressional districts, directing them to a central hub where they can learn about the importance of surface transportation funding and easily contact their elected officials.

The campaign is already active in states such as Texas and Missouri, with plans to expand into additional markets as the reauthorization process accelerates. Its website, [AmericaMovingForward.com](http://AmericaMovingForward.com), features local project examples, outlines what is at stake for communities and businesses, and encourages visitors to take action in support of long-term investment.

At the core of the initiative are four practical priorities that AGC believes resonate beyond policy circles: modernizing how transportation programs are funded, reducing the daily costs of congestion and traffic delays, streamlining permitting while maintaining environmental protections, and improving safety through better data on work zone incidents and outcomes. Rather than focusing on abstract policy debates, the campaign emphasizes tangible outcomes — projects people recognize in their communities and benefits they experience in their daily lives.

AGC developed the campaign strategy based on research showing that while many Americans do not closely follow the details of federal transportation legislation, they do respond to local stories that connect infrastructure investment to commutes, economic opportunity, and quality of life. As Congress moves through the reauthorization process, America’s Moving Forward will “pulse” around key legislative milestones to keep attention focused on the need for reliable, long-term funding for the nation’s roads, bridges, and transit systems.

For contractors and the broader construction industry, AGC leaders say the message is clear: Sustained federal investment in surface transportation is essential not only for infrastructure conditions, but for continued economic momentum nationwide. Contact AGC of America’s David Ashinoff at [david.ashinoff@agc.org](mailto:david.ashinoff@agc.org) to learn more about America’s Moving Forward, including how to support the campaign.