

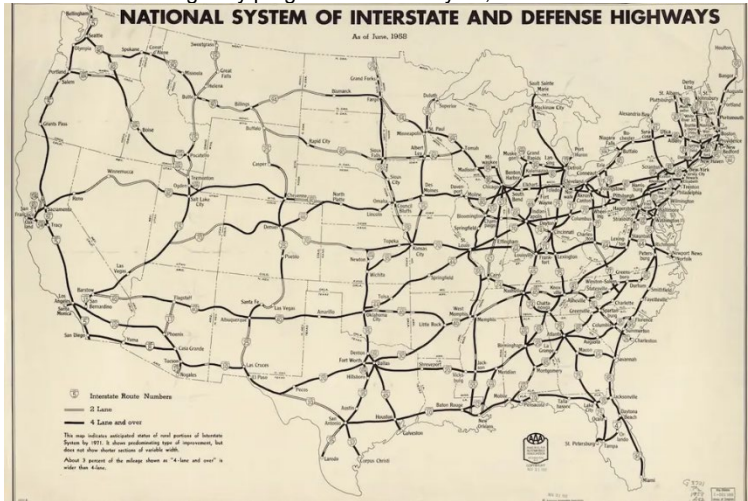
October 2026

Aging Interstate Highway System Creates a Growing Pipeline of Work in California

by: Lisa Mead, TRIP



Dwight D. Eisenhower meets with the President's Advisory Committee to discuss federal and state highway programs on January 11, 1955.



Map courtesy of Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division
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 first 250 years of United States history. For the heavy civil 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.

“Our highways badly need modernization and expansion to accommodate today’s vastly increased motor traffic,” Eisenhower said when signing the legislation.

Seventy years later, that statement rings just as true.

Authorized at an initial \$25 billion — equivalent to \$300 billion today — for the construction of 41,000 miles over a 10-year period, the massive construction undertaking ultimately spanned 35 years and cost approximately \$114 billion, or \$937 billion in 2026 dollars. Today, the sprawling network spans 48,890 miles and serves as the main arteries for much of the U.S., generating an estimated economic benefit of \$65 billion annually considering fuel savings, road safety improvements, and congestion reduction, according to research by the Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit TRIP.

“For seven decades, the Interstate Highway System has helped shape the economy in western states including California by connecting

communities, supporting commerce, and improving mobility,” said Clint Myers of Myers & Sons Construction Company in Sacramento, California, and TRIP Board Member. “Its lasting value extends far beyond transportation, providing the reliable infrastructure that has strengthened businesses, created opportunities, and supported economic growth across the region.”

The Aging Workhorse

Celebrating its 70th birthday this year, the Interstate Highway System is showing severe signs of aging, presenting an immense challenge for heavy civil contractors, engineers, and those who support the industry. The U.S. Department of Transportation estimates a staggering \$196 billion backlog in necessary improvements nationwide, which includes \$58 billion needed for pavements, \$65 billion for bridges, and \$73 billion for system expansion and enhancements.

Regionally, these infrastructure challenges are acute. In California, the state’s transportation network carries a massive load, reaching 325.4 billion annual vehicle miles of travel in 2025. This immense usage has heavily strained the state’s aging infrastructure: 58 percent of all major locally and state-maintained roads and highways in California are currently in poor or mediocre condition. Driving on these rough roads costs the average California driver \$885 annually in additional vehicle operating costs. Furthermore, 5 percent of California’s bridges are rated in poor or structurally deficient condition, and 54 percent of the state’s bridges were built in 1969 or earlier.

A Pipeline of Opportunity

For the heavy civil construction industry, the pipeline of upcoming work goes far beyond simply pouring new paving materials over old problems. Contractors will be tasked with completely modernizing the network to meet 21st-century realities.

The **Transportation Research Board** has indicated that addressing the system’s 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.

Modernizing the network will require “right-sizing” the system, adding necessary lane capacity to existing corridors, and comprehensively overhauling safety features to handle the influx of both passenger and commercial freight.

In California alone, the freight system moved nearly 1.4 billion tons of freight in 2024, and freight moved by trucks is expected to increase 68 percent by weight by 2050, putting even more pressure on the region’s infrastructure. As California’s interstates cross the 70-year mark, preserving their legacy will require the construction industry to move beyond temporary fixes. It is an opportunity to fundamentally reimagine these historic routes, ensuring the Golden State remains an economic powerhouse for the next 70 years.

“The Interstate Highway System is more than concrete and steel; it is a living symbol of American ambition, ingenuity, and unity,” TRIP Executive Director Dave Kearby said. “As we reflect on 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.”

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About the Author

Lisa Mead is the Marketing and Partnership Director for TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit.