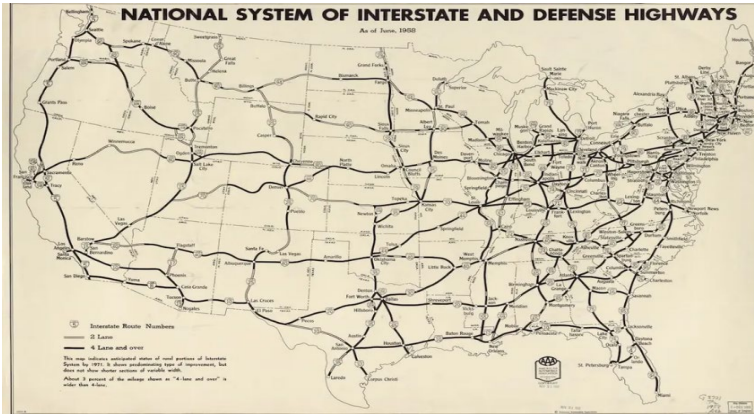


Aging Interstate Highway System Creates a Growing Pipeline of Work in the Mountain West

by: Lisa Mead, TRIP | October 2026



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.

“The Interstate Highway System remains one of our nation’s most valuable infrastructure investments,” said Jeff Williamson, President of the Transportation Group at Sundt Construction out of Tempe, Arizona, and TRIP Board Member. “It continues to power economic growth by moving people and goods efficiently while strengthening the

connections that support businesses, communities, and jobs throughout the Southwestern United States and Rocky Mountain 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 Colorado, 24 percent of major locally and state-maintained roads and highways are in poor condition, costing the average driver \$831 annually in additional vehicle operating costs. Furthermore, 30 percent of the state’s bridges were built in 1969 or earlier, and the Colorado Department of Transportation faces a \$350 million annual funding shortfall to maintain and enhance the system.

In New Mexico, 56 percent of major locally and state-maintained roads and highways are currently in poor or mediocre condition. Driving on these rough roads costs the average New Mexico driver \$1,043 annually in extra vehicle operating costs. To address its safety, reliability, and preservation challenges, the state has identified more than \$7.5 billion in needed but currently unfunded transportation projects.

Wyoming is facing similar struggles, with 33 percent of its state-maintained roads currently in poor condition — a figure expected to increase to 37 percent by 2028 under current funding projections. The state also anticipates an annual bridge funding gap of approximately \$125 million. Contractors are needed to tackle massive projects, such as the \$500 million reconstruction and redesign of the interchange between I-80 and I-25 in Cheyenne, which currently has no construction funding available.

A pipeline of Opportunity

For contractors, 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. Freight moved by trucks is expected to increase substantially by 2050 — growing 63 percent by weight in Colorado, 40 percent in New Mexico, and 73 percent in Wyoming.

“Today’s federal transportation investments provide an important opportunity to modernize our aging interstate system,” said **Donald Roland**, TRIP Board Member and a Vice President at **Granite Construction**. “To fully realize those benefits, we must keep projects moving efficiently before inflation further reduces what these dollars can accomplish.”

“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. “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 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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