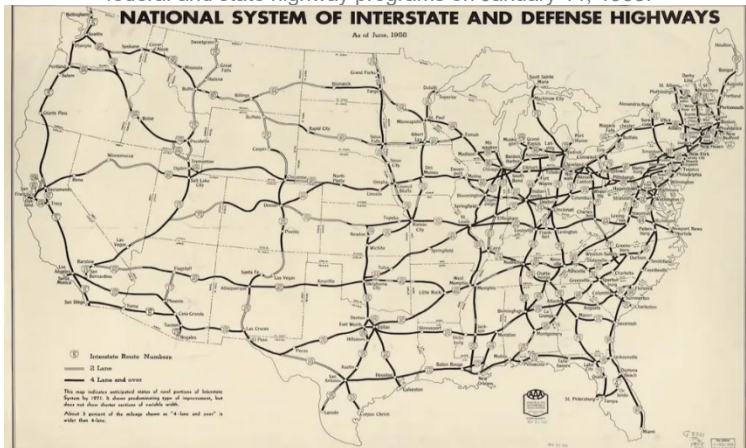


Aging Interstate Highway System Creates a Growing Pipeline of Work in the Southeast

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.

Cracks in the Concrete

Celebrating its 70th birthday this year, the Interstate Highway System’s infrastructure is showing severe signs of its advanced age. A critical issue for modern roadbuilders is that most interstate

segments still retain their original underlying foundations, meaning repeated pavement resurfacing yields diminishing returns and increasingly shorter periods of pavement smoothness.

In the Southeast, intense utilization and explosive population booms have heavily strained this aging network:

In Florida, the state’s population surged by 46 percent between 2000 and 2024 to reach 23.4 million residents — more than double the national average growth rate of 21 percent. This immense growth is severely straining the state’s transportation network, particularly its rural corridors that serve as the first and last links in the national supply chain. Traffic safety remains a major concern on these overburdened routes. In 2023, traffic crashes claimed the lives of 3,396 people in Florida. A disproportionate amount of these fatalities occur on rural, non-interstate routes, which often lack modern roadway safety features.

In Georgia, 25 percent of major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, costing motorists \$505 annually in additional vehicle operating costs. Additionally, 41 percent of the state’s bridges were built prior to 1970, increasing the need for rehabilitation or replacement as these structures continue to age.

In Tennessee, 14 percent of major roads are in poor or mediocre condition, costing drivers an average of \$276 annually in additional vehicle operating costs.

A Pipeline of Opportunity

For contractors, modernizing the network will require a massive pipeline of upcoming work. Beyond simply replacing aging pavements, roadbuilders will be tasked with completely upgrading outdated interchanges, “right-sizing” lane capacity, and fundamentally overhauling safety features to handle the influx of both passenger and commercial freight.

In Florida alone, 839 million tons of freight valued at \$1.1 trillion is moved annually, and freight moved by trucks is expected to increase 58 percent by weight and 94 percent by value by the year 2050.

“The Interstate Highway System has always been about more than concrete and pavement,” said Al Stanley, Vice President of Stanley Construction in Alabama. “It is the foundation that allows communities to grow, businesses to thrive, and people to travel safely and efficiently. As we look ahead, modernizing this network will require thoughtful planning, innovative project delivery, and strong partnerships to ensure every investment creates lasting value for the traveling public.”

“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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About the Author

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