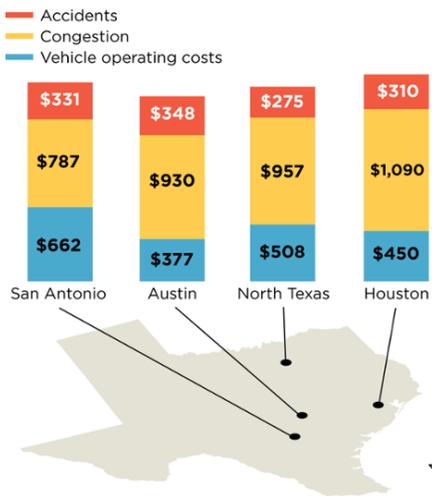


Drivers in Dallas, across state pay price for aging highways

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Costs of deteriorating infrastructure

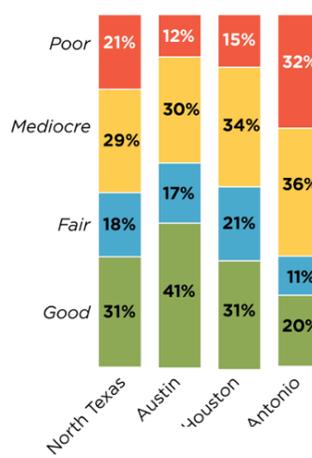
An inadequate transportation system costs Texas residents a total of \$25.1 billion every year. Here are the average costs per driver in the state's largest urban areas:



Time lost in traffic congestion



Pavement conditions on major roads*



*Numbers may not add up to 100 percent because of rounding. SOURCE: TRIP, a transportation research nonprofit

Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

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Texans have dodged higher federal and state gas taxes for decades, but it doesn't mean their wallets are getting any fatter.

A study from a transportation nonprofit released Wednesday said aging roadways and continued traffic congestion cost drivers in the state more than \$25.1 billion every year.

Research group TRIP concludes that those conditions lead to vehicle maintenance costs, lost time, increased gas consumption and other expenses that annually cost the average North Texas driver \$1,740.

"We're just transferring the cost over to the consumer, and there's obviously more cost-effective ways to pay for it, but for whatever reason, we don't seem to ever get those points across," Michael Morris, transportation director for the North Central Texas Council of Governments, said of the report.

The study puts much of the responsibility on federal officials as Congress finds itself facing a fiscal cliff in highway funding on the eve of its annual five-week August vacation.

The Senate next week is expected to adopt short-term fixes that will keep the Highway Trust Fund solvent through May. If it doesn't, TRIP estimates that Texas stands to lose \$3.4 billion in transportation funding in the fiscal year that starts Oct. 1.

Even if Congress buys more time, federal officials still must find long-term solutions for funding an aging infrastructure system that relies heavily on increasingly insufficient gas tax revenue.

Some highway advocates have pressured President Barack Obama to support raising the federal gas tax. His administration has so far resisted.

"A number of people have come up with some interesting ideas, none of which have gained critical mass," Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said Wednesday. "We need to do better next year after this temporary fix expires."

The study does not include the additional cost of tolls on drivers. Virtually every major road project in North Texas has some sort of tolling component on new lanes. The region will soon have the nation's largest network of managed toll lanes. The Obama administration's plan for a long-term transportation funding solution would make it easier to add tolls to existing interstate highway lanes.

Meanwhile, many urban planners, transportation experts and public transit advocates say what's really needed is a change in how the federal government spends what it has. Heavy spending on highways worsens the financial strain that they say suburban sprawl creates.

"Politicians not wanting to raise taxes has just speeded it up," said Benjamin Ross. The activist wrote the book *Dead End: Suburban Sprawl and the Rebirth of American Urbanism*.

Gas taxes unchanged

The federal gas tax has remained at 18.4 cents per gallon since 1993. The state gas tax has been 20 cents per gallon since 1991.

As vehicles become more fuel-efficient, drivers can drive more road miles for each dollar they pay in gas taxes. That means they effectively pay less in gas taxes than they did more than 20 years ago.

Meanwhile, as highways and the interstate system age, the cost of upkeep grows.

Most federal spending on highways and transit comes from the Highway Trust Fund.

The standalone account is funded by taxes paid on the sale of every gallon of gasoline or diesel fuel. But as it has numerous times in recent years, the fund is running low as the Sept. 30 end of the fiscal year nears.

TRIP's study estimates that for every dollar that Texas paid in fuel taxes between 2008 and 2012, the federal government spent \$1.13 on road improvements. Citing Federal Highway Administration estimates, the report said that each dollar spent on infrastructure improvements resulted in \$5.20 worth of savings from reduced emissions, vehicle maintenance expenses and other costs.

TRIP is based in Washington, D.C. Its board is made up largely of representatives from construction companies and civil contractors. A spokeswoman for the company could not be reached for comment Wednesday.

The group's report said long-term fixes to transportation funding are needed not just for residents, but to prevent road congestion that could slow economic growth. TRIP said that more than \$1.1 trillion in goods are shipped from sites within Texas each year. More than \$1.2 trillion in goods are shipped to places in the state.

"Making needed improvements to Texas' roads, highways and bridges could also provide a significant boost to the state's economy by creating jobs in the short term and stimulating long-term economic growth as a result of enhanced mobility and access," the report says.

Call for new approach

Patrick Kennedy is an urban planner who co-founded the group A New Dallas, which wants transportation officials to rethink how they approach their jobs.

He said he's ambivalent about raising gas taxes. To him, it's more important that federal and state transportation departments change how they spend money.

Kennedy said building wider, faster highways only creates more congestion. He said it also promotes less dense development, which suppresses economic and property tax potential. That practice essentially leaves the government unable to afford the infrastructure it builds by keeping revenues and expenses out of balance, he argues.

"We're already beyond our means," Kennedy said.

Ross, the author and scholar who lives in Bethesda, said the federal government should spend more on public transit and high-speed rail projects. He pointed to Dallas Area Rapid Transit and Dallas City Hall's idea to add an underground light-rail line to increase capacity as

a prime example of a project that could use federal funds. That project is unfunded.

"There are all these things people want, and they're still building highways," Ross said.

Changing behavior

Dallas resident Miller Henley sees another solution. He said studies like the one released Wednesday never mention what he sees as "horrendous" driving habits that cause congestion.

Henley said drivers too often tailgate, pack into the right-hand lanes feeding into entrance ramps, block intersections during rush hour and stop in active lanes to load or unload passengers.

Henley said traffic authorities should go "ticket-writing crazy" to change how people drive and raise funds for road improvements like fixing potholes.

"New roads always seem the answer, but I think as with most crises, changes in human behavior can mitigate much of the problem," he said.

Staff writer Kimberly Railey in Washington and The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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