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Growth buries metro roads, report says

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During the past 15 years, traffic on major Georgia highways grew 10 times faster than additional highway lanes, according to a report scheduled to be issued today by a national road advocacy organization.

The result is simple, the report says, and any Atlantan can feel it: congestion.

The problem is a transportation funding crisis nationwide but with unusual impact in Georgia, said Frank Moretti, director of policy and research at The Road Information Program, also known as TRIP, which issued the report.

"Georgia is among a small number of states facing such a significant level of growth," Moretti said. "I think that's where the challenges in Atlanta and statewide are much greater." Georgia's population increased by 45 percent from 1990 to 2006, the report says, fifth-fastest rise in the nation.

One factor in the weak lane growth during the past 15 years may be that Atlanta highways underwent a big expansion program in the 1980s called Freeing the Freeways.

The DOT commissioner then, Hal Rives, said in 1988 that he thought the expansion would do for 10 or 15 years.

After that, he told the AJC, "I don't think we'll be able to do much more, because we're going to be pretty well locked in. ... That's when I expect MARTA to really come into its own." MARTA's last rail expansion was to North Springs in 2000.

TRIP mostly consolidated previously released data, and noted transit shortfalls but didn't analyze transit data. It emphasized the danger to unrepaired bridges and highways, and noted that Georgia's road quality ranks tops.

TRIP is funded by road construction and equipment companies. Their concern is shared by agencies and

advocates on the critical state of transportation funding, given past and future growth. In Georgia, even transit and road advocates that are often in conflict have banded together to ask legislators to do something about the money shortage.

Most of the gas tax that pays for roads and bridges is charged as cents per gallon and, therefore, doesn't rise with inflation. But road construction costs are inflating plenty — by 43 percent in the past four years — according to the report, and state gas tax money can't be used on transit.

The state Department of Transportation said last year it had to delay 510 projects that were scheduled for contracting out in the next six years, simply for lack of funds — about \$7.7 billion. TRIP reports the DOT's estimates of a \$51 billion shortfall to build all the road projects in its long-term plan. The DOT has given preliminary approval to all those long-range projects, which altogether will cost \$113 billion to build.

But it can be hard to know how much all of that is "needed." That long-range plan contains some wish-list projects; it also contains important projects that DOT officials intend to include in a six-year construction plan as soon as the next update rolls around.

The complicated planning process seems to have produced some confusion in the TRIP report. As of Wednesday, the report named "the most needed but unfunded projects in the Atlanta metro area" but lists projects that are already built or under construction, or are slated for funding in the Atlanta Regional Commission's long-range plan.

But any confusion shouldn't detract from the report's message of the funding crisis, which resulted in deep project cuts, said ARC's chief of transportation planning, Jane Hayse.

DOT spokesman David Spear agreed: "If anything, it gets more severe each day."