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TRIP: Arkansas roads, bridges face increasing deterioration

More than one-third of Arkansas' major roads are deteriorated, 23 percent of the state's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, urban traffic congestion is mounting and the traffic fatality rate is among the highest in the nation.

This is according to a new report released today by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation organization. TRIP's report finds that increased investment in the state's transportation infrastructure could improve road and bridge conditions, enhance safety and support long-term economic growth in the state.

The report, "*Future Mobility in Arkansas: Meeting the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility*," finds that nine percent of major roadways are in poor condition and an additional 25 percent are in mediocre condition. Roads in need of repair cost each Arkansas motorist an average of \$308 annually in extra vehicle operating costs – \$634 million statewide – including accelerated vehicle depreciation, additional repair costs and increased fuel consumption and tire wear. The TRIP report includes a list of sections of roadway throughout the state that are in need of reconstruction or pavement preservation work, but that can not be completed due to a lack of transportation funds.

In addition to deteriorated road conditions, seven percent of Arkansas's bridges are structurally deficient and an additional 15 percent are functionally obsolete. TRIP's report identifies several bridge projects that currently lack adequate funding to proceed.

Commuting and commerce are constrained by growing traffic congestion in Arkansas' major urban areas. In 2008, 39 percent of the state's urban highways were congested during peak travel times. Three of Arkansas' five most significant highway chokepoints are located in the Little Rock area, including the I-430 / I-630 Interchange and a five-mile segment of I-30.

Over the past decade, Arkansas has used a combination of federal and state funding to improve its surface transportation network, but many sorely needed transportation projects still remain unfunded. According to the TRIP report, without a significant boost in funding, numerous needed transportation projects will not proceed, including a major reconstruction, pavement preservation projects and roadway widening on 15 state highways statewide, plus repair or replacement of bridges on I-40 at Lake Dardanelle in Pope County, on I-40 over the White River in Prairie county and on I-540 on the Arkansas River in Sebastian and Van Buren counties.

"Increased funding at the state and federal level is essential in addressing the concerns identified by the TRIP report," said D. B. Hill, III, vice president of the Arkansas Good Roads Transportation Council. "While we work continuously with our congressional delegation on the need to reauthorize the federal surface transportation program, the Arkansas Legislature created the Blue Ribbon Committee on Highway Finance to address ways of providing modern, fair and adequate funding for Arkansas' highways, streets and bridges. When their report is released on July first, Arkansas must support the Blue Ribbon Committee's recommendations in order to protect

our infrastructure investment and ensure the continued safety of our citizens."

This year's federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), a.k.a. "the stimulus," provides about \$352 million in stimulus funding for highway and bridge improvements and \$28 million for public transit improvements in Arkansas.

TRIP says this funding has served as an important down payment on needed road, highway, bridge and transit improvements but is not sufficient to allow the state to proceed with numerous projects needed to modernize its surface transportation system.

"The federal surface transportation program, which expires on Dec. 31, 2010, remains a critical source of funding for road and bridge repairs and transit improvements in Arkansas," said Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP, in a written statement about the new report. "It will be critical that Congress approves a new federal surface transportation program that could include a significant boost in funding for highway and transit improvements in Arkansas.

"While the state has put a combination of federal and state funds to good use in the past, in the coming years, many additional needed projects will remain stranded on the drawing board because of insufficient funding," Wilkins continued. "It is critical that the state adequately fund its transportation system and that Congress produces a timely and adequately funded federal surface transportation program. Thousands of jobs and the state's economy are riding on it."