

CALIFORNIA Builder & Engineer

Safety And California Road Conditions

A look at the facts shows it is time to get serious about fixing the problem

By Loren Faulkner -- California Builder and Engineer, 1/19/2009

Ask any California motorist these days about road conditions — just about anywhere in the state — and you'll hear, "terrible" or "dangerous" mentioned often. In Southern California it's not unusual to see, for example, stretches of the 91 Freeway with deep potholes in the asphalt or concrete just as you are about to bump over them at freeway speeds.

This sort of thing is becoming way too common. You would think that crews would be out in force taking care of the worst places, but with money tight and the fiscal budget unsound, crews and projects are stretched thin.

Yet, the following reminder of a national survey by The Road Information Program (TRIP) and a road condition overview by Transportation California (www.transportationca.com) — appearing in early 2008 — are in order. It is not just because of the wear and tear on vehicles and wallets, but because of our safety as well. Congress needs to provide an infrastructure revenue package to the states ASAP — starting with the Golden State:

California's Rough Pavements Put State At Top of Worst Roads List . . . Again

Poor roads cost California drivers as much as \$778 a year

Drivers in all of California's major cities are feeling the pinch of heavy traffic — on the road and in their wallets. The state's rough pavements cost some Californians as much as \$778 a year in additional wear and tear.

TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that California — despite some progress — still rules the bumpy roads. Los Angeles, San Francisco-Oakland, San Jose, San Diego and Sacramento made the top 10. Riverside-San Bernardino, Oxnard-Ventura, and Fresno made the top 20 list of large urban regions (500,000+population).

The big change this year in the Top 10 list is that San Jose fell from the top slot, for good reason. San Jose reduced its percentage of poorly rated roads from 66 to 60 percent in the last two years. Other California cities saw slight reductions, or held the line on deterioration.

Nonetheless, rough roads are still the norm in California urban areas. TRIP found that while a quarter of the nation's major metropolitan roads — interstates, freeways and other critical local routes — have pavements in poor condition, California cities on the top 10 list have 46 to 65 percent of pavements rated in poor condition.

These poor roads create additional vehicle operating costs (accelerated vehicle deterioration, additional maintenance needs and increased fuel consumption). In California's biggest urban areas, poor roads cost the average motorist more than \$650 a year, and approximately \$750 a year in the Los Angeles and the Bay Area. That compares with a \$413 national average.

Four California urban areas ranked in the top five costliest: Los Angeles, San Francisco-Oakland, San Jose and San Diego. Sacramento ranked eighth.

"The good news is California is making progress in improving freeways and urban roads, thanks to a serious commitment at all levels of government to address the problem," said Mark Watts, executive director of Transportation California, the state's leading education and advocacy group for transportation.

"The bad news is now that we've made a down payment on our infrastructure future, our funding again is threatened. The state budget crisis, a possible reduction in federal funding plus escalating construction costs will put a crimp in the buying power of California's imperiled transportation dollars," Watts said.

Roadway maintenance and rehabilitation typically are funded through motor fuel tax revenues. "Gas taxes — state and federal — are not keeping up with basic maintenance requirements," Watts said. "There is a real danger of lagging further behind."

TRIP notes that a U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) report to Congress indicates that through 2025 the nation will fall short of the cost of maintaining current urban pavement conditions by \$119 billion and will fall short of making significant repairs by \$270 billion.

Federal funding for highway repairs and improvements in the fiscal year 2009, starting on October 1, 2008, may be reduced as a result of a forecast deficit of \$3.2 billion in the Highway Account of the Federal Highway Trust Fund. Congress is currently considering providing additional highway funding to avoid steep cuts in federal highway funding.

According to the TRIP report, the continuing increase in urban traffic is putting significant wear and tear on urban roads all over the country. Travel on urban roads is increasing and travel by large commercial trucks is growing even faster than travel by cars. Vehicle travel in California increased by 27 percent from 1990 to 2005 and is anticipated to increase by another 25 percent by 2020.

In addition ... twenty-five states expect to face budget shortfalls of at least \$36 billion during fiscal year 2009, largely as a result of shrinking tax revenues. Because most states are not allowed to run a deficit or borrow to cover their expenditures, it is likely that states will have to consider drawing down reserves, cutting expenditures or raising taxes.

"It is critical to keep the momentum we've created over the past two years," Watts said. "If we take our foot off the pedal now, it will be even more costly to fix our roads."

Tables: Poor roads and additional vehicle operating costs. (sources: www.transportationca.com and www.tripnet.org)

Source: Market Scout

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	
	Poor	Mediocre	Fair	Good	Add'l Vehicle Operating Costs
Los Angeles	65	26	6	3	778
San Francisco-Oakland	62	29	6	3	761
San Jose	60	29	7	5	746
San Diego	53	29	7	12	684
Sacramento	46	40	6	8	655
Riverside-San Bernardino	35	48	10	7	586
Oxnard-Ventura	35	42	15	8	571
Fresno	30	36	21	13	515

	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	
	Poor	Mediocre	Fair	Good	Add'l Vehicle Operating Costs
Santa Rosa	48	37	9	7	668
Palm Springs	48	29	11	13	641
Stockton	41	30	12	16	588
Modesto	29	41	20	10	518
Lancaster-Palmdale	13	34	27	26	345
Bakersfield	5	41	31	23	294