

## Mississippi rural roads among worst, according to report

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Mississippi has among the highest percentage of rural roads in poor condition in the nation, according to a new report.

The findings by TRIP, a national transportation research group, lists Mississippi tied with New Mexico for fifth among the 50 states. In each state, 25 percent of the rural roads are in poor condition under criteria used for the report.

Mississippi is the only Mid-South state in the top 5. Arkansas is tied with Pennsylvania and Oklahoma at No. 9 -- all three states have 22 percent of rural roads in poor condition -- and Tennessee fails to make the list of the 25 worst states.

The report finds that Mississippi also has the fourth highest percentage nationally of traffic fatalities on its rural, non-Interstate roads, 2.93 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel.

In addition to safety, those familiar with the state's road system say local economies depend on roads in good condition.

"If cities and towns can improve their street infrastructure, the climate for economic development will continue to improve and ultimately provide more jobs for Mississippians," said Shari Veazey, executive director of the Mississippi Municipal League.

In DeSoto County, one of Mississippi's more densely populated and affluent counties, local officials say road and bridge maintenance is generally good. The bigger issue is building new roads and widening existing ones to provide access.

"We've really, through the years, made (maintenance) a priority," said Supervisor Lee Caldwell, the county's delegate to the Metropolitan Planning Organization. The MPO coordinates road planning and funding for the Memphis metro area. "The problem isn't maintaining, it's coming up with funding as we grow to build connector roads."

Interstate 269, providing a loop around the Memphis metro area and linking to the eventual I-69 corridor, is an example of the county's dilemma -- a major thoroughfare providing access and growth opportunities, but bringing with it the need for connector roads that must be funded.

"Having connectors is a huge issue," Caldwell said. "There's no way the taxpayers of our county can meet that need. So that's the dilemma -- maintaining the roads we have and also building new ones."

Derrick Surette, executive director of the Mississippi Association of Supervisors, said county governments are responsible for the bulk of maintenance on the state's

road system. He said counties are responsible for about 52,000 miles of roads, and about 19,000 miles of the 52,000 are eligible for state and federal assistance.

"At least 70 percent of the county road mileage needs pavement maintenance," according to Surette. "In addition, Mississippi counties are responsible for maintenance of nearly 10,000 bridges, and 30 percent of the county-owned bridges are either deficient or posted (meaning weight limits)."

Surette estimated the state needs about \$400 million annually to catch up to the demand in infrastructure needs on roads.

Caldwell, in DeSoto County, said finding the money to play "catch up" is the challenge.

"We're behind the eight ball in Mississippi," she said. "We've tried really hard to get ahead, but we haven't been able to. We go to Washington and express our needs every year, but the funding hasn't been there to help us."

And without the funding to maintain roads, and to widen and build new roads, DeSoto County and the state will pay a price.

"The mouth of Mississippi is closed," she said of the need for more access leading into Mississippi through DeSoto County in the northern end of the state. "We can come to a screeching halt if we do not get some state and federal funding. I'm very hopeful there will be more money, but then the concern is -- will it come to our area?"