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Report: Widening I-95 should be top priority in Va.

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Widening parts of Interstate 95 between Richmond and Washington, D.C., should be Virginia's top transportation priority, according to a new study that ranks 50 transportation projects that an outside research group says are critical to the state's economic well-being. A host of other Northern Virginia transportation upgrades are among the top 10 projects cited as priorities by the group, including the construction of high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes on I-95/395; the widening of Interstate 66 through Prince William, Fairfax and Loudoun counties; and extending Metrorail service from Fairfax to Ashburn.

The report by TRIP, a national transportation research group based in the District, said all 50 of the projects it identified are critical to Virginia's economy, but it did not specify how those projects would be funded.

Many of the projects cited by the group are already on the state's priority list, though state officials recently canceled plans to build HOT lanes along I-395 after Arlington County sued over the project. The biggest problem is finding the funding. State lawmakers are now debating Gov. Bob McDonnell's plan to borrow \$3 billion for road construction.

TRIP Executive Director Will Wilkins said it's "critical that Virginia's transportation system is funded at the local, state and federal level. Thousands of jobs and the state's economic well-being are riding on it."

Researchers analyzed information provided by the Virginia Department of Transportation, the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation and federal agencies to determine which projects are most important in terms of economic benefit, job creation, and improved mobility for residents. The list includes 36 highway projects, eight railway improvements, and six projects to improve public transportation.

Highway projects outnumber all other transportation initiatives, according to TRIP spokesman Frank Moretti, who called Virginia's highways "the backbone of the state's economy."

Moretti said the group's findings complement Virginia's own vision for improving the state's transportation infrastructure as outlined in the state's long-range transportation plan.

"We were really looking at the priorities of the state," Moretti said. "We see this report as a blueprint for the state's economic future in terms of the improvements to the transportation infrastructure the state is going to need."

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A new study by TRIP, ranks a host of Northern Virginia transportation upgrades as critical for the state's economic well-being, including widening Interstate 95.-Brig Cabe/Examiner File