

Ohio on road to improvement

Ohio spends more than national average on roads ranked 13th in nation

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A Reason Foundation study ranks Ohio as 13th best in the nation for safe, well-planned and cost effective, but still expensive roads and bridges hit by high gas and road salt prices.

In Northeast Ohio, that could include the rebuilt Grand River bridge, the under-construction state Route 2 in Lake County or country roads in Lake and Geauga counties in projects that started under Republican former Gov. Bob Taft and continued under Democrat Gov. Ted Strickland.

"I think one reason Ohio ranks so well is that the administration of both parties in Columbus have recognized the importance of infrastructure to Ohio stability," said Dino DiSanto, deputy chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Steven C. LaTourette, R-Bainbridge Township, who plays a major role in transportation funds for Ohio.

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In the foundation's 18th Annual Highway Report, Ohio's 13th-place 2007 ranking is up nationally from 28th in 2000, 16th in 2005 and 17th in 2006 for traffic congestion, fatalities, pavements (especially stronger asphalt), narrow lanes, bridge conditions and total spending for interstate and rural mileage.

Much of that improvement was seen by Lake County Engineer James R. Gills and Geauga County Engineer Robert L. Phillips.

Gills also is board president of the five-county Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency, which obtains and distributes Ohio Department of Transportation and U.S. DOT funding.

"Ohio has worked hard. In Lake County when I came into office, we were on the

bottom on area bridge conditions. We worked hard. NOACA averaged \$35 million to \$45 million on annual road improvements in a nine-year period," Gills said.

Phillips said, "What you're seeing is fruition for those things coming together, replacement of small bridges in small counties like ours and the big ones on the interstates. You're seeing roads resurfaced, but sometimes it takes five years to get the money and plans."

The foundation said 20 states improved roads while spending less than the national average.

"Ten other states, led by Ohio and Utah, improved their systems but spent more than the national average," the report stated.

The nation overall spent an average \$600,000 per mile to improve state-controlled highways by a slight average of 0.90 percent from 2002-2007.

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An Ohio Department of Transportation truck clears snow from Route 6 on Tuesday in Chardon Township.

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"The most improvement was in the percent of interstate congestion and the last in the percent of rural arterials in poor condition," the report said.

Lake, Geauga impacts

For deficient bridges, Arizona was in the best condition with 10.63 percent needing work. Rhode Island was the worst with 52.94 percent of its structures near collapsing, like the bridge in Minnesota did on Aug. 1, 2007, because its gusset plates had rotted.

In Ohio, 24.51 percent of its bridges were found deficient in the foundation study.

Mainly with federal revenue in 1996, workers rebuilt the state-controlled Interstate 90 high-level bridge over the Grand River in Madison Township.

But in 2007, the federal government started spending \$25.4 million for plans and then construction of new gussets on the I-90 bridge to avoid repeating the Minneapolis disaster.

In Cleveland, the rotted high-level I-90 bridge was left standing and sliding into the Cuyahoga River as it was before and during the 2002-2007 period. But workers could start this year building a \$450 million entirely new bridge.

In the report period, sturdier asphalt and noisewalls were used for I-90 work in Cuyahoga County's Euclid eastbound through western Lake County.

During Strickland's first year in office in 2007, major traffic congestion inspired the \$199 million-plus Route 2 (Lakeland Freeway) project handled by ODOT and Gills' office in Lake County.

Phase 1 started in Wickliffe and Willowick in 2008 east across the Lakeland Freeway.

The road now handles 68,000 daily motorists.

That is quadruple the traffic when built for \$14 million in the 1960s. More lanes and intersections will be more than enough for current drivers.

County road congestion prompted NOACA and Gills to try in 2004 to fix and expand the two-lane Lake Road in Madison Township so it can handle 3,000 vehicles a day, far more than it was built for in a cottage area in the early 20th century.

But it wasn't until 2009 that NOACA got a total of \$5 million-plus in federal and state funds to widen Lake Road pavement from 20 to 26 feet and install storm sewers for proper drainage on a road with ditches on both sides.

"Lake Road is a best example of fixing a country road. We finally got the money. When it's resurfaced, it's going to add to the safety of everybody," Gills said of the project to start this year.

In Geauga County, Phillips works on his share of country roads.

"Auburn Road goes from one end of the county to the other. When I first came here, much of it was all gravel and very narrow. It was 9 feet wide and now it's 11 feet wide, and it's all resurfaced finally. Country roads require a lot of maintenance," the county engineer said.

NOACA recently approved \$750,000 to resurface Bell Street and Auburn Road in Newbury and Auburn townships and \$500,000 to resurface Auburn Road from Mayfield Road to Wilson Mills Road in Munson Township.

Auburn Road has had two separate pedestrian/vehicle fatalities since 2008.