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# Study ranks state among worst for traffic jams, bad bridges

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When it comes to urban road congestion and deteriorating bridges, North Carolina is one of the worst states in the country, according to a study released last week by The Reason Foundation.

The state, once called the "Good Roads State," ranked 48th in urban interstate congestion and 41st in deficient bridges, according to The Reason Foundation's *17th Annual Report on the Performance of State Highway Systems (1984 to 2006)*, which uses data as recent as 2006. The Reason Foundation is a libertarian-leaning, nonprofit think tank based in Los Angeles.

North Carolina ranked 29th out of 50 states in traffic fatality rates per 100 million vehicle miles traveled.

The study measures the performance of all state-owned roads and highways. It calculates the effectiveness and performance of each state in 12 categories, including traffic deaths, congestion, pavement and bridge conditions, highway maintenance costs and administrative costs.

About 70 percent of urban interstates in North Carolina qualify as congested, while 31 percent of the state's bridges are deemed structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The ratings are determined based on bridges' physical conditions and ability to function under current traffic volumes.

As traffic jams in large cities escalate and spread to smaller areas, 35 states now report that at least 40 percent of their urban interstate highways are congested, up from 31 states the previous year. With urban congestion even hitting South Dakota, the list of states without any clogged interstates is down to three: Montana, North Dakota and Wyoming.

Overall, however, North Carolina ranked 23rd among the 50 states in the categories examined by The Reason Foundation, an improvement from 31st the year before. Because states have different budgets, system sizes, and traffic, comparative performance depends on both system quality and resources available.

Meanwhile, the N.C. Department of Transportation, which maintains more than 12,700 bridges in the state, and NC Go! traded news releases last week about the state's bridges. NC Go! is a statewide coalition advocating more investment in transportation in North Carolina.

The DOT sent an e-mail touting the state's new bridge management program, which "focuses on timely maintenance, rehabilitation and replacement" and "places a greater emphasis on preservation activities to extend the life of bridges and help prevent costly future repairs."

The release went on to say the DOT will soon spend millions of dollars in preventative maintenance and to replace some bridges sooner.

North Carolina has 6,547 bridges that are 40 years old or older; more than half of those are more than 50 years old. The state's seven-year transportation budget includes about \$1 billion to replace 838 bridges across the state.

The transportation group NC Go! said the anniversary of the Minnesota bridge collapse is a reminder of North Carolina's need to invest in its infrastructure.

"North Carolina is falling further and further behind," said Berry Jenkins, NC Go! co-chairman. "Our bridges are aging out of usefulness and safety faster than we can pay to repair or replace them."

The group is urging state lawmakers to consider a large-scale transportation bond in their 2009 session.

"If we ever want to get ahead of inflation and address the transportation needs of our fast-growing state, the time has come for a substantial bond package," Jenkins said. "We have to commend the legislature for its work this session, but there is more to be done."

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