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## Minnesota roads are safe, but congested

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As Minnesota lawmakers wrestle with a budget deficit, we should all ask if we're getting our money's worth from the taxes we pay. When it comes to state spending on roads, two researchers give Minnesota mixed marks.

The Los Angeles-based Reason Foundation ranked Minnesota 18<sup>th</sup> in cost efficiency in its latest annual report on state highway systems, published in August 2008. (You can find the report online at <http://www.reason.org/ps369/>.) David T. Hartgen, an emeritus professor of transportation at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, wrote the report, along with Ravi K. Karanam, an engineer at Qualcomm.

While 18<sup>th</sup> isn't bad, you have to dig into the factors that make up that index to get to the most interesting findings of the report.

The authors use state and federal data to evaluate the states on 12 different measures. These include five measures of receipts and spending, four measures of road bumpiness or obsolescence and one measure of bridge conditions. Urban congestion and fatality rates also figure into the report.

Each of these measures is adjusted for the amount of road mileage under the control of state government. (The roads covered in the report include interstate highways, U.S. highways, and state-numbered roads.)

First, the good news for Minnesota. It's the second safest state as measured by fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles. (Massachusetts is first.) The authors don't offer an explanation, but perhaps "Minnesota Nice" actually extends to the highways. Minnesota's urban interstate roads are high-quality, relatively speaking. They rank 12<sup>th</sup>-best in the country on the International Roughness Index, beating out the roads of all our neighbors save North Dakota. Likewise, the state's rural arterial roads are in better condition than most states, ranking 20<sup>th</sup>. They're also in better condition than those of neighboring states, though worse than another northern state (Washington).

Minnesota came out well on its bridges—it was ranked fifth-best in the nation, with 13 percent deficient. Obviously that didn't do any good for people who lost friends and

loved ones in the 35W bridge collapse. Wisconsin, by the way, had nearly as good a record, ranking sixth with 15 percent of its bridges deficient.

Minnesota ranks near the middle of the pack in several measures. It's 22<sup>nd</sup> (first is best) in the percentage of its rural roads that are at least 12 feet wide, one measure of safety.

On the spending side, Minnesota is neither that good nor that bad. It ranks 23<sup>rd</sup> among states in receipts per mile and 22<sup>nd</sup> in capital and bridge disbursements per mile. (All other things equal, a lower number means more effective spending.)

While the report has some good news for Minnesota drivers, there's also some bad news. To start with, Minnesota dropped 5 places from the previous year's rankings on the overall index.

It spends more per mile on maintenance than the average state (36th). The three stingiest states are North Dakota, West Virginia and South Dakota.

Though Minnesota is near the middle of the rankings in total disbursements per mile (25<sup>th</sup>), it is slightly worse than the national average in administrative costs (28<sup>th</sup>), suggesting that there may be some administrative inefficiencies to wring out.

Another bad piece of news is that Minnesota's rural highways are significantly worse than the national average, coming in at 33<sup>rd</sup>. They are also worse off than comparable roads in the cold-weather states of Massachusetts, both Dakotas, Illinois and Indiana, among others.

Twin Cities residents don't need a report to tell them about the one measurement in which Minnesota does the worst: Urban traffic congestion. "Minnesota is 49<sup>th</sup> in urban interstate congestion," the state's profile says, "with 79.40 percent congested." Only California, the exemplar of traffic frustration, is more clogged. The national number, by comparison, was just under 51 percent.

So where does this quick tour of the nation's roads leave Minnesotans? Our urban interstates are in relatively good condition, but urban drivers are stuck in traffic more than anyone except Californians.

When they look at the highway system, then, legislators ought to look at administrative costs and ways to improve personal mobility.