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## Region roads, spans rate low

Group says research shows thoroughfares are in need of repair or replacement

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**SCHENECTADY --** More than half of the region's main roads are in subpar condition, compromising safety and straining public budgets, a national highway research group reported Wednesday.

A study by the Transportation Research Program, using 2003 data available from state and federal agencies, found that 30 percent of major roads in the area are in poor condition, and another 21 percent are mediocre.

The group also found that 7 percent of area bridges are structurally deficient due to deterioration and another 34 percent of bridges are functionally obsolete, meaning they don't meet modern design standards or are no longer sufficient to accommodate today's traffic volume.

The Washington, D.C.-based group uses its analysis to push for more transportation funding. The organization is funded primarily by insurance companies, construction and engineering firms and labor unions.

The poor road conditions mean commuters in the region are more likely to face bigger traffic jams, bridge closings or weight limits and more accidents, said TRIP research director Frank Moretti.

When it comes to fixing roads, "you don't want to get too far behind because it's very difficult to turn the ship around as these numbers get higher," he said. "The state of your infrastructure is not an area you want to let slide too far because it's hard to get it back."

A spokeswoman for the state Department of Transportation disputed many of TRIP's conclusions, pointing to the state's own statistics showing that the number of state-maintained roads rated "good" or "excellent" has increased from 54 percent to 66 percent over the decade. Meanwhile, the number of state-owned and maintained bridges rated good or better stands at 73 percent, compared with 69 percent 10 years ago.

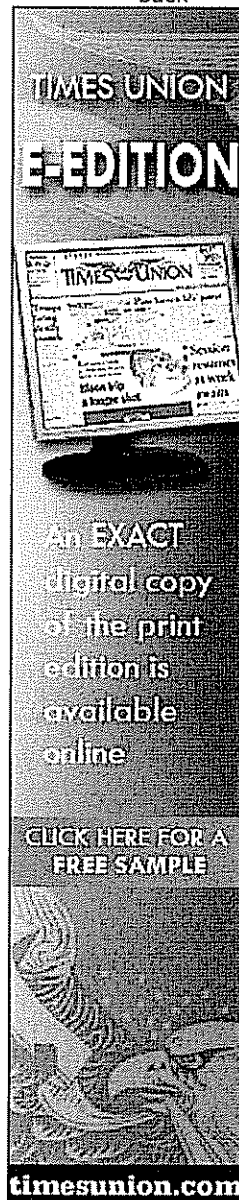
"New York state's highways are safer than ever, and in the last decade, the condition of our roads and bridges has improved markedly," said Jennifer K. Post. "The TRIP report, which covers state, county and local roads, appears to be riddled with flawed analysis that presents an inaccurate picture."

Post said 2003 was the safest year on record on New York highways, with the lowest number of fatal crashes since records have been kept.

Regionally, the state has spent \$221 million on pavement improvements and \$138 million on bridge improvements in the last five years, she said. Another \$45 million or more was spent on additional improvements aimed specifically at improving safety and mobility, she said.

But Moretti and others gathered at Schenectady City Hall for the release of TRIP's report card said their numbers show room for improvement. In addition to state-maintained roads, the TRIP report also takes into account the conditions on roads maintained by counties, cities and towns.

Paving needs in cash-strapped Schenectady, for example, are estimated at some \$18 million, said



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Mayor Brian Stratton, but the city's annual paving budget is just \$1.5 million. The city relies heavily on state and federal aid to do even that much, he said.

Assemblyman Paul Tonko, an Amsterdam Democrat who serves on his chamber's Transportation Committee, noted that DOT capital project spending hasn't been increased substantially in several years.

Flat budgets, as costs for materials and labor escalate, translate into reductions in actual work done, Tonko said. And the longer that work is delayed, he said, the more it will cost eventually.

"At a time of extreme needs that speak to safety, economic revitalization and wise use of public resources, we need to invest in transportation," he said.

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