

I-70 MOUNTAIN CORRIDOR

Study: Congestion costs state economy \$2.25B a year

Translate

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Congestion on Interstate 70 between Denver and Grand Junction isn't just about lost time and added frustration. Delays carry substantial financial costs, which the Metro Denver Economic Development Corp. has quantified in a new study.

Congestion costs along the I-70 mountain corridor now run \$2.25 billion a year, up from \$839 million in 2007 when Development Research Partners last studied the issue, according to the report, which was released Tuesday.

Of that \$1.4 billion increase, only 45% reflected higher costs because of inflation. The majority reflects a congestion problem that is getting worse, not better, despite some investments and lots of complaining, the study says.

The study breaks out what is behind the \$2.25 billion a year estimate as follows:

- \$1.9 billion in lost economic activity. Just a small 0.5% decrease in worker productivity and business efficiency because of congestion shaves real dollars off state GDP.
- \$319 million in costs because of lost personal time along the I-70 mountain corridor.
- \$47 million reflects tourism declines. Even a small 1% decline in visits after a bad experience translates into millions of dollars lost in future spending.
- \$14 million in additional shipping costs from truck delays.

More congestion tends to trigger more accidents. Local governments face higher costs tied to providing more emergency response services and local roads face more wear and tear because of highway traffic getting diverted.

The problem goes beyond tourists unhappy about not getting the full use of their ski passes or hotel rooms. High housing costs in resort towns have forced many service workers into longer commutes. The more time workers lose on the road, the more likely they are to eventually quit a job.

"If congestion along the I-70 corridor worsens, these constraints are likely to translate into higher business costs through increased wages, expanded housing subsidies, and greater employee turnover and absenteeism associated with unreliable travel times," according to the study.

The state has undertaken several projects to improve the flow of traffic on I-70 through the mountains, including a \$700 million rebuild of the roadway in the Floyd Hill area and the addition of auxiliary lanes on the west side of Vail Pass, as well as the modernization of the Eisenhower and Johnson tunnels.

But combined, the spending has fallen well short of the \$30 billion that the study's authors estimate would make a dent in the time, productivity and money lost to added delays. And while roadway improvements can help with smoother flows in the long run, they can exacerbate delays and congestion in the near term.

Better road design and improved corridor maintenance and traffic management are only part of the equation. Weather conditions act as wildcards, while increased demand remains a constant source of pressure.

With population gains and increased tourist visits expected to push travel demand higher, congestion along the I-70 corridor is expected to only intensify through 2050, according to the report.