

Road Report

A publication of the Road Commission for Oakland County for public officials serving Oakland County www.rcocweb.org

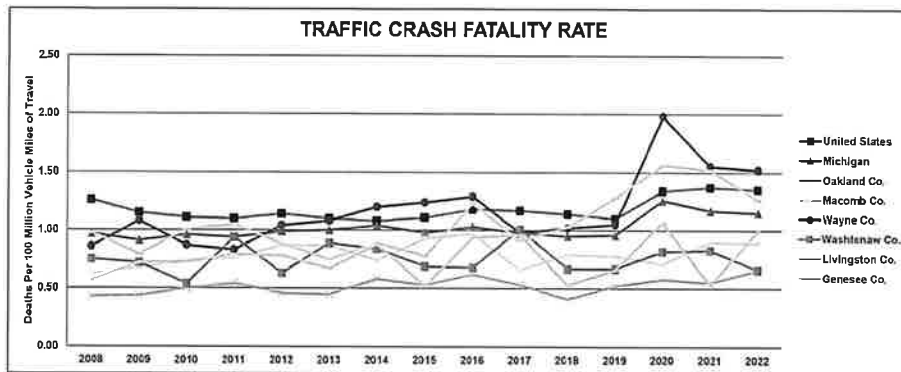
Oakland County traffic-fatality rate remains well below state and national levels

Once again in 2022, Oakland County saw a substantially lower traffic-fatality rate on its roads than either the state or national rates.

The county, state and national fatality rates were recently released for 2022. For the year, Oakland County's fatality rate remained about half of the state and national rates.

In fact, Oakland County has had the lowest, or among the lowest, traffic-fatality rates in the state nearly every year for decades. In part that is the result of the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) making safety its top priority since the 1970s. Since that time, the agency has been a national leader in traffic safety and one of the first and most aggressive users of traffic-crash data to drive traffic-safety improvements.

For 2022, Oakland County's traffic-fatality rate was 0.66 deaths per 100 million



In the graph above, Oakland County is the bottom line, having had the lowest fatality rate most consistently, compared to other Southeast Michigan counties, the state and the nation, for many years.

Information provided by the Transportation Improvement Association.

miles of vehicle travel. For the year, the statewide rate was 1.15 fatalities per 100 million miles of vehicle travel and the national rate was 1.35.

"Safety is our number-one priority," stat-

ed RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar. "While we are always striving to reduce the number of crashes on our roads, even one fatality is too many. It is still heartening
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RCOC study concludes lowering speed limits on gravel roads does not result in drivers slowing down

A frequent request received by the Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) is to lower the speed on gravel roads. While this is often not possible, as gravel road speed limits are dictated by state law, a new study produced by RCOC concludes that doing so may actually have the opposite effect.

Current state law establishes the "general gravel-road speed limit" at 55 MPH. Lower speed limits can be established based on the number of "vehicle-access points" along the road. Vehicle access points include drive-ways, side streets, private roads, etc. Roads with 60 or more vehicle-access points within a half mile are set at 25 MPH.

Roads with 45 to 59 vehicle-access points in a half mile will be set at 35 MPH, while those with 40 to 44 access points will be 40 MPH. Segments with 30 to 39 access points will be 45 MPH, and all roads with



A gravel road in good shape. Not all gravel roads are this smooth all the time, though.

fewer than 30 access points per half mile will be 55 MPH with no posted speed limit.

The law also allows communities to request that the Road Commission lower the speed limit on gravel roads with unposted 55 MPH speed limits to 45 MPH, if the
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RCOC road conditions surpassing statewide averages

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) continues to have fewer roads in poor condition than Michigan as a whole.

According to the Michigan Transportation Asset Management Council (TAMC) – the organization created by the state Legislature to monitor road conditions in the state – RCOC has continued to have a smaller percentage of roads in poor condition, for at least the last three years, than the state as a whole. Michigan roads are rated using the Pavement Surface Evaluation and Rating (PASER) system, a universal method to evaluate road surface conditions.

“When the state Legislature and governor increased road funding in 2015, we committed to putting the bulk of the new funding into the condition of our paved roads,” explained RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar. “This PASER data and the statewide numbers validate what we have been doing.”

For 2022, about a quarter of both RCOC’s roads and roads statewide were in good condition (PASER rates roads as

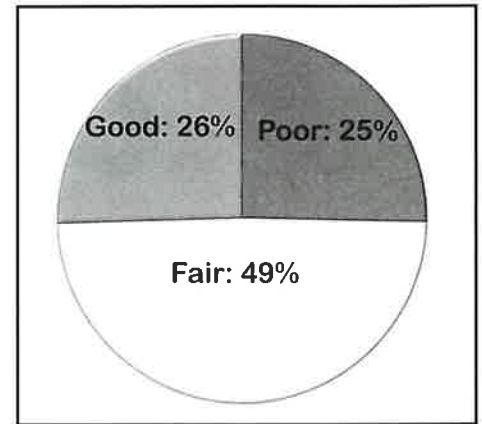
good, fair or poor). However, 25 percent of RCOC roads were in poor condition, compared to a statewide average of 33 percent, while 49 percent of RCOC roads were in fair condition, compared to the statewide average of 42 percent.

“What those numbers tell me,” observed RCOC Deputy Managing Director/County Highway Engineer Gary Piotrowicz, “is that we have done a good job of repairing the roads in the worst condition.”

Piotrowicz added it is the roads in poor condition that the public notices the most. “People don’t notice if a road is in good or fair condition, but they will certainly recognize when it is in poor condition,” he stated.

“That’s why it is important that we have a smaller percentage of our roads in poor condition than the statewide average. We are not yet where we want to be, but as the statewide averages suggest, Michigan, as a whole, continues to suffer from inadequate road funding.”

Piotrowicz noted the 2015 state road-funding increase, while helpful, was inadequate to fully address the state’s road-



The pie chart shows the road conditions on RCOC’s federal-aid-eligible roads.

funding crisis. The increase is generating about \$1.2 billion in additional road funding statewide, after being phased in over six years, starting in 2017.

“We have made significant headway with the funding available to us,” Piotrowicz said, “but we really need the Legislature to finish the job and provide the full amount of funding needed to maintain the system.”

Road Commission receives \$2 million federal SMART grant

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) is receiving a \$2 million federal Strengthening Mobility And Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) grant.

The funds will be used to study and develop a business model for deploying “vehicle-to-infrastructure” technology, which would allow vehicles to communicate seamlessly with the transportation infrastructure. Such communication holds the potential for significantly improved safety and mobility for motorists.

“The challenge,” RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar noted, “has been that no one has yet come up with a successful model for funding the technology and infra-

structure needed to make this possible.”

Kolar added that the study will look at ways that the private sector could monetize this communication, which would provide an incentive for private companies to fund the necessary technologies and infrastructure. “We know there is the potential for significant safety and mobility improvements through technology, and we know that tax dollars are not likely to be available to fund those enhancements,” he said. “This study will allow us to look at ways the private sector could harness this technology, make it available to those in the public infrastructure world and make money while doing so.”

Kolar also pointed out that this will be

one of the first serious efforts in the nation to identify a viable business model that could enable the deployment of vehicle-to-infrastructure technology. “Answering this question is key to moving to the next phase of vehicle and infrastructure technology. We have a long history of leading in this field, so who better than RCOC to take on this challenge?”

The study will also be something of a continuation of study initiated by RCOC and Oakland County general government in 2018. The County’s Economic Development Department has committed to supporting RCOC’s efforts through the grant.

Stay tuned for developments as the project rolls out over the coming several years.

SAFETY — CONT’D FROM FRONT

to see that our roads remain very safe compared to others across the state and nation. That is the result, in part, of all the hard work done by everyone at RCOC.”

Not only is Oakland County’s rate lower than the state and national rates, it is also lower than most other counties in Southeast Michigan. Washtenaw County saw a drop in its fatality rate for 2022,

tying Oakland’s rate.

Kolar added that RCOC’s safety efforts are paying off. “Virtually everything we do is driven by an interest in safety,” he said. “Whether it is how we select the projects we do each year, how we design those projects, how we prioritize our road maintenance activities, etc. – it all based on crash data and safety analyses.

“Every RCOC employee contributes, in

one way or another, to helping keep our roads safe. These numbers confirm that what we are doing is making a difference.”

In fact, if Oakland’s roads experienced the same fatality rate as the national rate, another approximately 60 people would die on our roads every year. “That’s a huge deal,” Kolar said. That’s 60 families every year that do not have to suffer the loss of a loved one.”

2024 Road Commission budget grows by nearly \$16 million compared to 2023

The Road Commission for Oakland County (RCOC) expects its fiscal year 2024 budget to grow by nearly \$16 million compared to the current year's budget.

The proposed 2024 budget was presented at the agency's annual budget public hearing Aug. 17. Adoption of the budget is expected to take place at the regular RCOC Board meeting on Sept. 21.

Anyone interested can review and comment on the proposed budget, which is available on the RCOC website, www.rcocweb.org (click on the "Financials" button on the home page, select "Budget Summary" and click on "Proposed 2023-24 Budget"). RCOC's fiscal year runs from Oct. 1 to Sept. 30.

The proposed budget, at \$193.9 million, grew primarily due to increases in federal road funds and interest earned. The current year's budget, as adopted in September 2022, totals \$178.1 million.

The amount of federal funding RCOC receives fluctuates from year to year depending on the type and number of projects conducted. The interest revenue fluctuates based on the amount of money held by the agency and the interest rates available. RCOC anticipates receiving \$39.1 million in federal funding in FY 2024 (compared to \$27 million for the current year) and \$1.9 million in interest revenue (compared to \$525,000 for the current year).

RCOC anticipates no increase for the coming year in its largest source of revenue — state road funds generated by the state fuel taxes, vehicle-registration fees and the state income tax. The agency expects to receive about \$122.3 million in state road funding in 2024, the same as it received in the current year.

The state dollars are RCOC's main funding source for operations.

The remaining revenue making up the budget comes from local community contributions (\$10.8 million — down from \$13.2 million in the current year), RCOC's contract with the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT) to maintain state highways (\$14 million, up from \$12.5 million for the current year) and fees and other revenues (\$2.6 million, about the same as received for the current year).

The proposed budget includes nearly \$70 million in annual contributions toward safety-focused road-improvement projects; \$38.7 million for road maintenance efforts such as pothole patching, gravel road grading and salting/plowing; and \$17.3 million for maintaining traffic signs, signals, pavement markings and guardrails among other activities.



*RCOC Chair
Andrea
LaLonde.*

The remainder of the budget is dedicated to operating expenses including customer services, vehicle maintenance, staff wages, building maintenance and administration.

"This is a sound budget," reported RCOC Board Chair Andrea LaLonde. "We remain careful about how we use our revenue, making sure we can do the most to improve the road system in the most cost-effective manner," LaLonde added.

RCOC Vice Chair Nancy Quarles concurred. "We operate in a fiscally responsible manner," she explained. "But, like everyone else, we continue to deal with the impacts of inflation," she stated. "Unfortunately, our dollars simply are not going as far as they used to, with road project prices jumping significantly in the last year and the cost of everything rising dramatically."

Board Member Eric McPherson added the Board is deliberate in how it spends the money it receives. "We recognize that our revenue is derived from the state-collected fuel taxes, vehicle-registration fees and income-tax dollars," he explained. "We are always conscious that we are spending the public's money and want to make sure that we get the biggest return for those dollars."

Included in the proposed budget is the 2024 Road Improvement Program (RIP) which includes next year's planned road-construction projects. Among the planned

CONT'D ON PAGE 4 — SEE BUDGET

SPEEDS — CONT'D FROM FRONT community is willing to cover the cost of posting the 45 MPH speed limit signs and if the Road Commission agrees.

Many communities, however, would like some of their gravel roads posted at 35 MPH or lower. To determine if posting at such lower speeds would actually reduce the speed motorists travel on the roads, RCOC conducted the study.

To do this, the Road Commission solicited subject road segments from township supervisors across the county. It then selected 17 road segments that are currently either unposted 55 MPH or posted at 45 MPH. For those segments, RCOC conducted speed studies to see what speeds motorists are currently traveling.

RCOC then posted the road segments for 35 MPH and again conducted speed studies. The data was collected under smooth and dry conditions for both speed studies. The data was collected using radar speed detectors that are typically not evident to motorists, so they did not

impact motorist behavior.

The results were counter intuitive: In most cases, motorist speeds either stayed virtually the same or increased when the 35 MPH speed limit was posted. Of the 17 segments, the average speed increased on nine segments, the average speed dropped very slightly on three segments (by one or two MPH) and stayed the same on three segments.

"Interestingly, speeds did not slow down significantly on any of the segments, and actually increased on the largest portion of them," RCOC Managing Director Dennis Kolar reiterated. "This suggests that simply changing the speed limit on gravel roads, as many people request, will not have the outcome they hope for and, in some cases, may have the opposite effect."

Kolar noted the RCOC study did not delve into why motorist behavior changed in the way it did when speed limits were lowered. But, he suggested, there are a couple of logical explanations that may explain the outcome. "When

the speed limit is unposted, as it is for many gravel roads, motorists tend to drive at the speed they feel is safe, which in many of these cases was already at or below 35 miles per hour. However, when you post a speed limit at 35 MPH, the motorists may assume that is the speed they should be driving, even if they would otherwise drive slower. Therefore, those drivers will then drive faster to meet the posted speed limit."

One of the problems with posting speed limits on gravel roads, Kolar said, is that, unlike paved roads, gravel road conditions change. That means the conditions on a gravel road can be different from one day to the next, and what is a safe speed one day, may not be the next day.

"Because of that," Kolar said, "it can be problematic to post speed limits on gravel roads that may, in fact, be inappropriate for those same roads in some conditions."

The study was shared recently with the Oakland County Association of Township Supervisors (OCATS).

for OAKLAND COUNTY

The RCOG vision - mission statement:

Builds Quality life through good roads. Road Unconstrained for Global Leaders to move.

Project objectives:

- Build and reconstruct roads
- Repair for the environment
- Increase the capacity of roads
- Increase the safety of roads

RCOG capabilities can assist to work together to provide:

- A sustainable road network and plan
- Increase the capacity of each individual
- Build and improve the network

Andrea LaLonde, Chair
Nancy Quarles, Vice Chair
Eric McPherson, Commissioner
Dennis G. Kolar, PE, Managing Director
Gary Piotrowicz, PE, PTOE,
Deputy Managing Director/
County Highway Engineer