**Fiscal Facts: Changing Traffic Patterns During COVID-19**

The COVID-19 pandemic began causing traffic on Wisconsin’s roads to plummet even before the governor’s Safer at Home order was issued on March 24. Traffic counts were dropping in all parts of the state, not just hard-hit areas. The decline has potential implications for public health, the economy, traffic safety, and a key state revenue stream that funds transportation projects.

Across 61 locations where the state’s Department of Transportation collects data on a continuous basis, traffic decreased by more than 40% from roughly 2.5 million vehicles on Tuesday, March 3, to 1.5 million on Tuesday, April 7. The DOT selected 52 locations to provide a representative sample of statewide traffic patterns, which the Wisconsin Policy Forum supplemented with nine additional locations in Milwaukee and Dane counties for further insight into the state’s two largest metro areas.

Traffic volumes have declined between 22% and 56% at each of the 61 locations. From a public health perspective, this may be a positive indicator that residents in all parts of Wisconsin are staying home when possible to help prevent spread of the virus.

Other likely benefits of having fewer vehicles on Wisconsin’s roadways may include fewer auto accidents, but such data are not yet available. If fewer crashes are indeed taking place, it is possible that fewer injuries and fatalities may occur as a result. Less traffic may also mean better air quality (which we did not research).

However, less driving also means lower state gas tax collections. While the Department of Revenue does not yet have data to quantify the impact, any reductions will further exacerbate longstanding funding challenges for highways and other transportation infrastructure, including local roads. At $1.07 billion in 2019, the state’s motor 32.9 cents per gallon fuel tax accounts for just over half of the state’s revenues in its transportation fund. As with all things COVID, difficult choices lie ahead for state and local officials this year, and likely years to come.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at wispolicyforum.org.*