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Study: Build new roads to boost Detroit economy

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As Michigan struggles to pay for much-needed repairs to crumbling roads, a new study out today suggests the state should focus on relieving traffic congestion hotspots to boost metro Detroit's economy by instead building new roads.

If metro Detroit were to ease bottlenecks in areas such as Novi, Dearborn and Pontiac, the benefits could result in as much as a \$7 billion annual boost to the region's economy and a \$500 million boost to the tax rolls in the next 15-20 years, according to the study "Gridlock and Growth: The Effect of Traffic Congestion on Regional Economic Performance."

The benefits would come from increased business productivity and efficiency, and time freed up for residents to engage in economic activity that they may currently avoid because travel can be so slow and costly, said the study's author, David Hartgen, emeritus professor of transportation studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

Besides building new roads, the study suggests tackling chronic bottlenecks on freeways and local roads by adding lanes, fine-tuning left-turn signals and encouraging employers to allow schedules that avoid rush hours.

"They all add up," Hartgen said of the suggested fixes.

The study, conducted by the Reason Foundation, a free-market think tank, used computer modeling of traffic patterns and other data in metro Detroit and seven other regions to conclude there could be huge benefits to reducing some of the worst suburban congestion where wealth, jobs and traffic backups are heavily concentrated.

The Michigan Department of Transportation, while intrigued, said its top priority is preserving roads rather than building new ones.

"The problem is we don't have the money," spokesman Bill Shreck said Wednesday.
