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Heavier trucks could be coming to N.J. Will roads and bridges be able to support them?

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6–8 minutes

Heavier trucks could start using the nation's highways and bridges if a bill to increase tractor trailer weights from 40 to 45 tons passes Congress.

The bill, which was voted out of a congressional committee in May 2023, is being supported by a coalition of shippers, manufacturers, agribusinesses and trade groups that contends allowing heavier trucks would make those industries more productive.

Opponents, which include several members of the New Jersey congressional delegation and Hunterdon County commissioners, are concerned about what heavier trucks would do to worsen the condition of aging bridges and highway pavement and about highway safety.

The bill would allow these 45-ton tractor-trailers to be allowed on roads, voluntarily, in 10 states. Roughly 28 states, predominately in the North and Midwest, permit these tractor-trailers on interstate highways. New York, and most New England states except Connecticut are among them. New Jersey is not.

U.S Rep. Tom Kean Jr, R-7th Dist., opposed the bill. He and the late U.S. Rep Donald Payne Jr., D-10th Dist., voted against it in May 2023 when it was before the house Transportation and Infrastructure committee which they are members of, according to congressional records.

“Congressman Kean is concerned with the safety of our drivers in passenger cars sharing the roadways with these larger trucks,” said Dan Scharfenberger, a Kean spokesperson. “Heavier trucks mean more wear-and-tear on our roadways, which is maintained by the NJDOT and local governments. This means more taxpayer dollars spent on maintaining roadways.”

The next step is for the House leadership to decide to bring the bill to the full House for a vote, he said.

If that happens, Kean plans to vote against it, Scharfenberger said.

Hunterdon County Commissioners sounded the alarm locally, passing a resolution in opposition of the bill. They cited a 2023 joint study by the National Association of Counties and National Association of County Engineers that determined 72,000 local bridges across the country couldn’t safely handle 45-ton tractor-trailers and that it would cost \$61 billion to replace them.

“The concerns of the pilot project are not only about traffic, but also safety, as many of our residents are commuters and would have to contend with heavier trucks that are harder to control,” County Commissioner Shaun C. Van Doren said in a statement.

The [American Society of Civil Engineers](#), which issues [a periodic report card](#) about the state of infrastructure, said a primary concern is the effect heavier trucks would have on local roads and bridges once they leave the interstate highway system.

“Every trip starts and ends on local roads, so while 91,000 pound (trucks) could be designed to be incorporated on the interstate systems, ultimately they have to get off the interstate to get to logistics and distribution centers and that’s where the impacts really get felt, how will that impact the local roads,” said Jim Pajk, [ASCE’s Transportation Policy Committee](#) chairperson.

While the “vast majority of interstate highways could handle the heavier loads, 42% of the bridges were built 50 years ago and are designed for a different truck loading,” he said.

“It will add stress on older bridges,” he said about trucks that could be 12% heavier. “There has to be an economic balance of allowing heavier loads and the infrastructure.”

U.S. Rep. Bonnie Coleman Watson, D-12th Dist., is also is opposed to the bill after municipal officials voiced their concerns about the effect of heavier trucks using local streets, said Michael Shanahan, a spokesperson for her.

She is opposed for several reasons, including safety concerns, Shanahan said.

“Law enforcement groups, local municipalities, U.S. Conference on Mayors, AAA, road safety organizations, the Teamsters, are all opposed,” he said. “It’s simply harder to stop a 45 ton truck than a 40 ton truck.”

“Towns in our district have also reached out to us to express their concerns about the increased traffic and noise,” he said.

“Municipalities will have to bear the burden of road repairs that would increase.”

An American Trucking Association spokesman said it’s a shipper-

driven initiative and the association is neutral on it.

Supporting it is a group called the [Shipper's Coalition](#) describes itself as a " joint effort of more than 80 of the nation's most prominent manufacturers, agribusinesses, and trade associations." That group contends increasing truck weights would make truck "more productive."

It said the bill is not a 50-state mandate, but rather a 10 state opt-in pilot program. It does not mean longer, higher, or wider trucks- just "more productive trucks." Trucks participating in the pilot program would also have to be Federal bridge formula compliant and meet axle weight limits of Federal law, according to the [coalition's position paper](#).

Each axle on the truck and trailer must have wheels and brakes, so the sixth axle means that there will be an additional set of brakes on the vehicle. USDOT found that this will allow the 6-axle vehicle to stop shorter than its 5-axle counterpart, the coalition said in a study.

A spokesperson for the coalition could not be reached.

Neither New Jersey Department of Transportation or the Federal Highway Administration officials rendered an opinion about the bill because it is pending legislation said spokespeople for both agencies. The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials also hasn't taken an opinion on the bills.

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