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Aging infrastructure little addressed by presidential candidates

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WASHINGTON - When the Interstate 35 bridge over the Mississippi River at Minneapolis collapsed in August 2007, killing 13 people, then-GOP presidential candidate John McCain was quick to blame misplaced priorities, including money spent on bridges to nowhere.

Candidate Barack Obama, then-locked in a Democratic primary contest with Hillary Clinton, said "too many of our nation's railways, highways, bridges, airports, and neighborhood streets are slowly decaying due to lack of investment and strategic long-term planning."

Since then, little has gotten under way to actually rebuild the nation's aging roads and bridges. Recent estimates suggest the task would take a sustained minimum of \$134 billion a year through 2035.

The American Society of Civil Engineers, which recently published its third "Failure to Act" clarion call - a look at the country's aged electric grid - reports the U.S. needs to spend \$1.7 trillion in the next nine years to shore up roads, bridges, and water and sewer lines reaching the end of their useful service.

"Infrastructure is basically the backbone of our economy. We need infrastructure to function properly," said Andrew W. Herrmann, a Pittsburgh-based engineer and president of the ASCE. Unfortunately, he said, the last serious investment dates back to Franklin Roosevelt and Dwight Eisenhower -- more than 50 years ago.

"We haven't been investing in our infrastructure and we're letting the infrastructure we have now deteriorate," he said. In 15 categories on its latest report card, he noted, the U.S. got 11 Ds and four Cs.

The most recent long-term federal plan for surface transportation improvements passed the House and Senate in 2005. It expired in September 2009 or, as the grassroots "Transportation for America" advocacy campaign trumpets, more than 900 days ago.

Transportation spending is expensive. Even the significantly pared down, five-year House bill would cost \$260 billion. The Senate's proposed two-year blueprint would cost \$10 billion more than projected revenues in the Highway Trust Fund supported by gasoline and diesel taxes. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood doesn't expect the alternate visions will be resolved this year.

Everyone seems to be aware that infrastructure needs are critical to growing the economy and to safety. Last year, a Rockefeller Foundation survey found Americans agreed on the need to deal with transportation infrastructure more than on any other issue, with 66 percent saying it was either "extremely" or "very" important. Four in five surveyed agreed such spending would create local jobs.

In a sense, time is running out. According to the Federal Highway Administration, the average U.S. bridge was built to last 50 years and is already 42 years old.

A few tightly focused snapshots reveal the almost-overwhelming complexity of the problem:

Animal Testing

Crucial or Cruel?

Tens of millions of animals are still sacrificed to biomedical research projects in labs across America each year. Scientists say the studies have to go on to find cures; animal protectionists say much of the work is dubious, but all sides agree better and cheaper technology needs to be found.

[In animal-testing debate, fur still flies](#)

Taxing Times

Paying taxes unites us. It also divides us. People can pay five and even six times more in state and local taxes than other folks in similar circumstances making similar incomes.

[Taxes unify Americans, but rates vary by state](#)



-- In places such as Michigan, state Department of Transportation officials classify 287 bridges as "structurally deficient," including 69 in Detroit alone. Several cross interstate highways.

-- Cincinnati's I-71 over the Ohio River is considered the No. 15 highway "choke point" according to a recent analysis. Seven spots in Texas are among the worst 25.

-- In Knoxville, Tenn., a 1,793-foot span over the Tennessee River, built in 1930, is closed until next summer for remedial work a contract indicates - on just one bridge -- will cost \$24.6 million.

Both Obama and his presumed Republican opponent, Mitt Romney, talk about the infrastructure needs of the country, often in the context of creating jobs. It's clear they both recognize something must be done, and that it has some urgency. As Obama put it in unveiling an infrastructure plan last October, "It should not take another collapsing bridge or failing levee to shock us into action."

Romney said last September that a plan to deal with structurally deficient bridges, roads and traffic choke points should address needs over 60 years, not try to mask them in a stimulus plan lasting weeks. While his campaign website does not mention dealing with infrastructure per se, it does ridicule Obama's claim that stimulus spending would go to "shovel ready" projects, which Obama has acknowledged were in short supply.

What neither candidate says is why previous crises haven't spurred more action. The scale of the problem facing the nation has reached a crisis point, according to a variety of interest groups, from trucking to tourism.

"It makes the quality of life for Americans more expensive because delays in transit drives up costs whether it's your individual cost as a motorist getting yourself to work or our cost as commercial truckers trying to move product," said former Kansas Gov. William P. Graves, now president of the Virginia-based American Trucking Associations.

Graves, a Republican, says Obama could have done more but blames a "strong anti-tax environment" for failures to move the agenda forward. "Even those people that perhaps would be willing to support an increase, in this case, in the fuel tax, are reluctant to come right out and say that because you sort of get politically beat over the head," he said.

Besides taxes, the complexity of infrastructure issues is illustrated by conflicting agendas. For example, while the American Automobile Association and the American Trucking Associations oppose increasing tolls to pay for highway improvements, they disagree on raising maximum truck lengths proposed in both the House and Senate bills.

On another measure of the quality of life that suffers through ongoing neglect -- damage caused by potholes -- companies such as Allstate say they can't quantify costs. But cities like Cleveland can. It paid out \$23,630 for 67 claims of damage done to vehicles by potholes last year, while denying 255 similar claims. It has already received 80 more this year, according to its legal department.

The coalition behind "Transportation for America" includes a Ventura County, Calif., supervisor; the Boulder, Colo.-based Outdoor Industry Association; the League of American Bicyclists; AARP; and passenger and commuter rail interests, among others.

Barbara Denny, a member of the Coronado, Calif., city council, said both Obama and Romney should be aware of transportation's impact on air quality in her community near San Diego. She wants them to know adding ferry service should be considered as an alternative to an Interstate 5 South widening project.

"I expect the presidential candidates to be in touch with the needs of our constituents and to support smart transportation," Denny said.

All Aboard Ohio, a rail advocacy group, recognizes that much of the cost of the improvements will be borne by the public, and wants presidential contenders to acknowledge it.

"What I need to hear from them is that this is an opportunity for this country to at least stay with, if not overtake, our competitors," said its director, Kenneth Prendergast. Some crumbling infrastructure, he said, looks like a Third World country.

"That's embarrassing to me," he said. "And I hope it's embarrassing to our leaders."

(Contact Scripps Howard News Service reporter Bartholomew Sullivan at sullivanb@shns.com.)

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