



U.S.

# A Disaster Brought Awareness but Little Action on Infrastructure

MARCH 3, 2014

Retro Report

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Like the weather, the need to repair America's troubled bridges is something that everyone talks about, without doing a thing about it. Or at least they do not do nearly enough.

President Obama is trying to change that equation. He has said so repeatedly in his State of the Union speeches and other messages, and he returned to that theme a few days ago. This time, Mr. Obama called for closing loopholes in corporate and business tax codes to free up \$302 billion that would be spent over four years to fix or replace aging bridges, roads, tunnels and rails — an infrastructure that he has described quite reasonably, if inelegantly, as “raggedy.”

What becomes of this latest presidential appeal is swathed in doubt. Anything that smacks of a tax increase is bound to face resistance in Congress, especially in this election year. Even catastrophe has failed to create a sense of urgency sufficient to spur officialdom to do much more to keep the ground, literally, from falling out from underneath us.

That is a lesson reinforced by this week's Retro Report, the first in a new season of weekly documentary videos that re-examine leading stories of decades past. It revisits the disastrous 2007 collapse of the I-35W

Bridge spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis. Scores of cars tumbled into the water. Thirteen people died. Nearly 150 others were injured. Investigators later concluded that blame lay with a design flaw dating from the bridge's construction four decades earlier. Steel sheets known as gusset plates, which tie beams together, were half as thick as they should have been and gave way under an unusually heavy load.

Surely, or so one might have thought, a disaster of such enormity would have the power to shock the nation into realizing that it had to do more to heal a crumbling infrastructure. Indeed, some change is underway, including a billion-dollar project about to begin to rehabilitate the worn, heavily trafficked Pulaski Skyway, linking Newark Liberty International Airport and the Holland Tunnel in northeastern New Jersey. A few states have increased their gasoline taxes to pay for infrastructure repairs. The American Society of Civil Engineers, which issues reports every four years on the state of bridges, roads and the like, sees improvement nationwide. In 2009, it gave the United States a letter grade of D. Last year, that D became a D+.

Better, but hardly reason to pop Champagne corks. The inescapable reality is that not enough has changed since 2007.

We'll focus here on just bridges. After all, they command a special place in America's heart — even in its songbook, whether it's urging San Francisco to open its Golden Gate, or feeling groovy at the 59th Street Bridge in Manhattan, or joining Maurice Sendak's and Carole King's Rosie as she brags how she can tap across the Tappan Zee (itself so superannuated that it will be replaced with a new \$3.9 billion bridge across the Hudson River north of New York City).

The numbers can be discouraging. Of 607,000 bridges in this country, more than 65,000 are deemed “structurally deficient” by experts. In Pennsylvania, a leader of dubious distinction in this regard, one bridge in four is so classified. Some 20,000 bridges around the country are labeled “fracture critical,” a wince-inducing term if ever there was one; it means that the entire structure could collapse should a single critical component

break. At least 8,000 bridges fall into both of those categories.

“There is no safety net — they’re all vulnerable,” Barry B. LePatner warns in the Retro Report video. A New York lawyer, Mr. LePatner is something of an infrastructure Jeremiah, raising alarms in interviews and in his 2010 book, “Too Big to Fall.”

How the United States allowed some of its most precious assets to decay so badly may say something about both its character and its leadership. This is a nation ever in the thrall of innovation. We like to build new things. We’re not so crazy about the drudgery of keeping the old in decent shape. Most bridges are meant to last 50 years; those classified as structurally deficient are, on average, a good deal older than that. As for political leaders, spending time and money on essential maintenance holds scant sex appeal. How many elected officials are just dying to preside over a ribbon-cutting ceremony for a new gusset plate?

In the end, it all boils down to money. There’s not nearly enough. The Federal Highway Trust Fund, the principal financing source for transportation projects, is practically kiting checks. That’s how close it is to insolvency. Part of the problem is that it depends heavily on a federal tax on gasoline, which provides about \$39 billion a year. That tax, 18.4 cents a gallon, has not changed since 1993. Because of inflation, it has lost 40 percent of its value over the years.

As the nation’s economic struggles continue, Americans are driving less. Pumping less gas leads to reduced tax revenues. There is, too, an ironic twist in the national goal of improving vehicles’ fuel efficiency. The less gas a car needs, the smaller the yield from that tax.

With all this as a backdrop, Mr. Obama has now turned to an altered business-tax structure as a way to raise his desired \$302 billion. Even if he gets what he wants, the money is still far short of what the civil engineers society has said is needed to stop the infrastructure decay: \$3.6 trillion.

Yet, as dire as it all may sound, there is no reason for panic. While a term like “fracture critical” has a terrible ring, those thousands of bridges remain safe as long as they are structurally sound (and are, one can only

hope, regularly inspected). Still, in the wake of the I-35W horror and more recent troubles, like a nonlethal collapse last year over the Skagit River in Washington State, no one could blame any drivers who regularly cross a bridge they know to be past its presumed expiration date if they were feeling less than groovy.

*The video with this article is part of a documentary series presented by The New York Times. The video project was started with a grant from Christopher Buck. Retro Report has a staff of 13 journalists and 10 contributors led by Kyra Darnton, a former "60 Minutes" producer. It is a nonprofit video news organization that aims to provide a thoughtful counterweight to today's 24/7 news cycle. Previous Retro Report videos can be found [here](#); and articles [here](#).*

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