

Fixing it First

America's infrastructure is showing its age. Our nation's roads, highways and bridges have increasingly received failing scores on maintenance and upkeep. For the nation's bridges, lack of maintenance can result in the sudden closure of a critical transportation link or, far worse, a collapse that results in lost lives and a significant loss in regional economic productivity.

More than 69,000 structurally deficient U.S. bridges span across the federally supported highway system, monuments of our nation's past prosperity and evidence of its misplaced priorities in recent years. Congress needs to declare the repair of these bridges to be an urgent priority, dedicate funding to their repair, and ensure that states are accountable for repairing these vital assets and knocking down the repair backlog. In addition to building shared prosperity for the future, prioritizing bridge repair will add thousands of jobs that our economy needs.

The repair backlog is tremendous. Every minute of every day, an American driver crosses a bridge somewhere in the U.S. that is "structurally deficient" according to government standards. One out of every five bridges in Rhode Island is likely to be deficient, for a total of 163 deficient bridges. An unacceptable 21.6 percent of bridges statewide are rated structurally deficient, compared to 11.5 percent nationwide.

According to 2009 inspection data and costs, Rhode Island would need \$1.13 billion to bring all of our bridges into a state of good repair. By comparison, Rhode Island spent \$39 million total on bridge repair and replacement in 2008. There's a clear need for robust investment in repairing and replacing our bridges.

Out of 50 states and the District of Columbia, Rhode Island ranks 4th worst nationally in terms of the overall condition of the state's bridges (1 being the worst, 51 being the best.)

Prioritizing repair could save billions of dollars in the future while creating thousands of additional jobs today. Past underinvestment in repair and diversion of maintenance funds toward building new highways does more than allow existing roads and bridges to slip into disrepair. It also ultimately costs state and local governments billions more than would the cost of regular, timely repair. Over a 25-year period, deferring maintenance of bridges and highways can cost three times as much as preventative repairs. "Fixing it first" is also a smarter investment for creating jobs: repair work on roads and bridges generates 16 percent more jobs than new bridge and road construction.

Regardless of the amount of wear and tear experienced by a specific bridge, most bridges are designed to last roughly 50 years. The average age of bridges in the U.S. is 42 years old. Rhode Island's bridges are an average of 52.6 years old. Because of this, the number of "structurally deficient" Rhode Island bridges is virtually guaranteed to increase in the coming years as a wave of old bridges further extend past their designed lives. More than 322 Rhode Island bridges are already 50 years old or older.

Preserving Rhode Island's existing transportation system is crucial to ensuring safety, prosperity and a higher quality of life. The economic costs of neglect are simply too high. It is time for our elected leaders to put Americans to work shoring up our infrastructure and ensuring Americans get the most bang for our transportation buck.

Rhode Island Counties, sorted by number of deficient bridges

County	Number of Bridges	Number of structurally deficient bridges	Percent of bridges that are structurally deficient
Providence	467	99	21.20%
Washington	134	33	24.60%
Kent	106	18	17.00%
Newport	42	10	23.80%
Bristol	5	3	60.00%