

ASCE 2009 Report Card

With US infrastructure in tatters, stimulus plan offers paltry sum

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The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) released its 2009 Report Card on the state of infrastructure in the US late last month. The report is a stinging indictment of the state of the nation's infrastructure, assigning it an overall grade of "D".

The report card evaluates the categories of Aviation, Bridges, Dams, Drinking Water, Energy, Hazardous Waste, Solid Waste, Inland Waterways and Levees, Public Parks and Recreation, Roads, Railroads, Schools, Mass Transit and Wastewater.

The ASCE estimates that it would take an investment of \$2.2 trillion over the next five years to update the nation's infrastructure. By the most generous calculations, the funds allocated in the final version of the Obama stimulus package would provide less than 5 percent of what is required.

Infrastructure conditions have worsened considerably since the ASCE's last report card was issued in 2005. The cost of improving US infrastructure has increased by over \$500 billion since 2005. The state of mass transit and aviation both dropped from D+ to D and roads declined from D to a D-. The report card cited the lack of a modern air traffic control system as causing increased delays and poor conditions at airports.

Earning a near-failing grade, US roadways are in such a state of disrepair that they cost motorists \$67 billion per year in repairs and operating costs, not to mention 14,000 lives. Some 36 percent of major urban highways are congested, forcing Americans to spend 4.2 billion hours per year in traffic at a cost of \$78.2 billion, or \$710 for every motorist.

The nation's inland waterways and levies also received D- grades. The report card notes that of the

257 locks still used in the US, 30 were built in the 1800s and 92 are over 60 years old. The average age of all federally owned and operated locks is almost 60 years, exceeding their planned design life of 50 years. While the status of US levies is largely unknown, the ASCE estimates it would cost over \$100 billion to bring them up to speed.

Wastewater and drinking water systems each earned a D-. Old, leaky pipes lose an estimated 7 billion gallons of drinking water per day. It would require at least \$11 billion in additional funding each year just to bring drinking water systems into compliance with federal regulations.

The ASCE report assigned a C- to US railroads, explaining that growth and changes in demand patterns have created bottlenecks that constrain traffic in critical areas. Because passenger and freight trains share most of the same rail lines, a large increase of use for either one results in constraints for the other. The report notes the potential economic gains that an effective rail system would offer: moving freight by train is three times as fuel efficient as moving it by truck, and traveling by passenger rail uses 20 percent less energy per mile than traveling by car.

American school facilities received a D rating. The National Education Association estimates it would cost \$322 billion to bring the nation's schools into good repair.

Other statistics are equally shocking:

- More than one in four bridges in the US are either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.
- The average age of the 85,000 dams in the US is over 51 years old.
- Nearly half of US households do not have access to

bus or rail transit and only a quarter consider either of these a "good option."

In general, the ASCE's report card paints a dire picture of a society functioning in decline and gross disrepair. As alarming as the report card is, the measures proposed by Obama's stimulus plan are pitifully inadequate and do not begin to seriously address this crisis.

The \$789.1 billion included in the latest version of the stimulus plan includes the following spending related to infrastructure improvements:*

- \$30 billion for modernization of the electric grid, advanced battery manufacturing, energy efficient grants
- \$29 billion for road and bridge infrastructure and modernization
- \$8.4 billion for public transit improvements and infrastructure investments
- \$8 billion for high-speed rail investments
- \$18 billion for grants and loans for water infrastructure, flood prevention and environmental cleanup

This \$93.4 billion in proposed spending—which includes some items not directly related to infrastructure—is only about one twenty-fourth of what is required, according to the ASCE's estimates. Even if the plan's entire \$789.2 billion were applied to infrastructure, it would still cover less than half of all the repairs and updates that are needed to provide the foundations of a sound infrastructure and safe and decent quality of life for the American population.

* Wall Street Journal, *February 13, 2009, Sources: Speaker of the House, House Ways and Means Committee, Senate Finance Committee*



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