

America's crumbling infrastructure

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A January study by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE), “The 2009 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure,” depicts the advanced decay of roads, bridges, water, and sewerage in the US. The report makes all the more glaring the Obama administration’s steadfast refusal to undertake a major public works program that could put the nation’s unemployed to work.

The study was originally scheduled to be released in March, but ASCE released it early in an attempt to influence the debate over the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The \$787 billion “stimulus package” ultimately allocated only \$71.76 billion directly to construction projects, and most of this money has yet to be spent.

The report card gave an abysmal overall score of “D” for the state of American infrastructure, stating that the investment need in infrastructure over the next 5 years is \$2.2 trillion, about 30 times what the Obama administration’s stimulus package has invested. The report estimates \$903 billion will be provided in this period from government spending at all levels, making the funding shortfall for infrastructure needs over the next five years \$1.176 trillion.

Since the report was released in January, economic conditions have likely eroded a substantial portion of estimated government spending on infrastructure. Tax revenues for states, localities, and the federal government have plummeted as millions lose jobs and businesses cut back. States across the country face unprecedented budget shortfalls, which has led to draconian cuts. Various states and cities have closed parks, reduced road maintenance, stalled long term road and rail projects, and put off critical water and sewerage investments.

Many of the states facing the worst economic conditions also have the most decrepit infrastructure. An astonishing 66 percent of California’s major roads

are in poor or mediocre condition, and 68 percent of its urban interstates are congested. Of the state’s bridges, 30 percent are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. According to the report card, “California spends \$2 billion less each year on highway maintenance and rehabilitation than is needed.”

The nation’s infrastructure has worsened since 2005, the report concludes. “US surface transportation and aviation systems declined over the past four years, with aviation and transit dropping from a D+ to D, and roads dropping from a D to a nearly failing D-,” it says. “Showing no significant improvement since the last report, the nation’s bridges, public parks and recreation, and rail remained at a grade of C, while dams, hazardous waste, and schools remained at a grade of D, and drinking water and waste water remained at a grade of D-. Just one category—energy—improved since 2005, raised its grade from D to D+.”

For the first time the ASCE report has included levees in its findings, giving them a grade of D-. It states that of the estimated 100,000 miles of levees across the country, many are more than 50 years old, and “the reliability of many of these levees is unknown.” Four years after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast, a pitiful \$1.13 billion in government spending is destined for levees over the next five years, compared to \$50 billion dollars in need.

Dams, which provide critical energy and water resources, have been rapidly deteriorating. In 2001, the number of deficient dams was 1,384; by 2007, the number had nearly tripled to 4,095. The number of “high hazard” deficient dams has increased from 488 in 2001 to 1,826 in 2007. “Many state dam safety programs do not have sufficient resources, funding, or staff to conduct dam safety inspections, to take appropriate enforcement actions, or to ensure proper construction by reviewing plans and performing

construction inspections,” the report notes.

The report finds that many drinking water systems—pipes, purification plants, and resources—are approaching or beyond service life, unreliable, and insufficient for growing needs. Thousands of ancient water mains and pipes will rupture over the next few months as cold weather stresses their aged cast iron to the breaking point. The report notes that leaking pipes “lose an estimated 7 billion gallons of clean drinking water a day.” At least \$11 billion annually is needed to address these problems.

Waste water received a grade of D- for persistent problems of aging equipment and lack of investment. Clogged, broken, or insufficient drainage leads to 850 billion gallons of sewer overflow discharge per year, and as much as 10 billion gallons of raw sewage is released per year from sanitary sewer overflows, according to an EPA report from 2004.

It is ironic that much of the infrastructure falling apart in 2009 was put in place during the nation’s last great economic crisis, the Great Depression of the 1930s. Then, the Democratic president, Franklin Roosevelt, put in place significant public works programs associated with names like the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Tennessee Valley Authority, and the Works Progress Administration. The aim was to forestall revolutionary change by putting millions to work.

While the social need for infrastructure is just as great as it was in the 1930s, the Obama administration insists that for the jobless crisis only “market solutions” can be considered.



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