

The Skagit River Bridge collapse: Another example of decaying infrastructure

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The four-lane north section of Skagit River Bridge, which is part of I-5 north of Seattle, Washington, collapsed at about 7 p.m. on Thursday evening after its girders were reportedly hit by a truck carrying oversized heavy equipment. According to the Washington Department of Transportation, there were no signs leading up to the much-traveled bridge indicating a maximum height for trucks or cargo. There were no reported deaths, though three cars fell into the Skagit River.

The truss bridge, which had a 57.4 (out of 100) Sufficiency Rating by the National Bridge Inventory (NBI) in its 2010 inspection, served an average of 71,000 vehicles per day and is on the main route between Seattle, Washington and Canada. The NBI's structural evaluation appraisal was given as 5, or "Somewhat better than minimum adequacy to tolerate being left in place as is."

According to the 2013 Report Card for Washington's Infrastructure, released on Tuesday by the Seattle Section of American Society of Civil Engineers, of the 7,743 bridges in the state of Washington, 391 (5 percent) are "structurally deficient," with 36 percent being over 50 years old, and 20 percent of the state's bridges being "classified as functionally obsolete because they either cannot meet current traffic demands or do not meet current design standards."

The Skagit River Bridge was not judged "structurally deficient," which indicates a need for repair or replacement, but "functionally obsolete." Built in 1955, prior to the Interstate 5 route, as part of the old Highway 99, the bridge was not built to interstate standards, but rather was grandfathered in.

The report predicts that in the next 20 years, another third of Washington's bridges will "exceed their design life," gave bridges an overall rating of C- (defined as

"Mediocre; Needs Attention"), and roads a D ("Poor; At Risk"), citing a drop in funding even as aging infrastructure hits a critical point.

Despite all this, Washington has the sixth-*lowest* percentage of structurally deficient bridges in the US, with "only" 2,861,030 daily trips across bridges considered deficient—the number-one state for bridge hazards is Pennsylvania, with 22,773,880 such trips, according to Transportation for America. According to the ASCE's 2013 Report Card on America's Infrastructure, "Approximately 210 million trips are taken daily across deficient bridges in the nation's 102 largest metropolitan regions."

Washington Governor Jay Inslee estimated the cost to repair the Skagit River Bridge at \$15 million. US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood told members of Washington's congressional delegation on Friday morning that there are emergency funds available, and authorized an initial \$1 million. It is not yet clear how much will be available in emergency funds, nor from where the remaining money will come in the cash-strapped state.

Interstate 5 runs from Canada, through or near most major west coast US cities, and south into Mexico. It serves as a major thoroughfare for travelers and trucking. As Skagit River Bridge acts as a major link between Canada and the US, and as a much-used route for commuters in the area—where Boeing has major operations—repairs are expected to take less time than the thirteen months of the collapsed Interstate 35W highway bridge in Minnesota. In the mean time, traffic is being thrown onto alternate routes, with local commutes that once averaged half an hour now hitting 70 minutes.

The area's roads apart from the highway are not designed for such heavy traffic, to say nothing of major

truck commerce, and the smaller bridges over the Skagit River will undergo additional strain. One of the alternate routes recommended by Washington State Department of Transportation (crossing the north fork of the Skagit River on Best Road) includes a bridge already noted as “structurally deficient,” with its last inspection being in August of 2010 when its substructure was given a rating of 4. The WSDOT’s recommended alternate route to Canada, or for those who can bypass Mount Vernon along SR 9, likewise crosses a “structurally deficient” bridge with a substructure rating of 4.

Washington is home to eight of the Forbes 400 Richest people in the world, including Bill Gates (#1), and Steve Ballmer (#19) of Microsoft, Howard Schultz (#311) of Starbucks, and Jeff Bezos (#11) of Amazon.com. Together, just these four individuals hold US\$106.6 billion—more than two and a half times that earmarked for infrastructure in the Fiscal Year 2014 national budget proposal by Obama.



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