

Highway bridge collapses after fire in Atlanta, affecting over 200,000 commuters

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A day after a busy overpass on Interstate 85 (I85) collapsed in Atlanta, Georgia, three suspects, all reportedly homeless, were arrested Friday in connection with the fire that caused the catastrophic failure. One suspect, Basil Ebely, was charged with first-degree criminal damage to property and is accused of intentionally setting the fire which began in a storage lot underneath the freeway.

Flames were reported at 6:21pm on Thursday night, in the middle of Atlanta's notorious evening rush hour. Traffic across the overpass was halted by a nearby fire department and the deck of the overpass collapsed around 7pm. No one was injured.

The responding fire department had contained the blaze by 8pm, although firefighters continued to combat hot spots among the wreckage well into Friday morning. Firefighters currently speculate that some PVC pipe stored beneath the bridge for upcoming work ignited, although no one has offered a postulation as to how the pipe, which is not highly combustible, ignited in the first place. The FBI is currently investigating the cause of the blaze, although there is no evidence of terrorism.

On a normal day, an estimated 250,000 vehicles use the affected portion of I85, making it one of the United States' busiest thoroughfares. Moreover, the collapse occurred where I85 North intersects and merges with State Highway 400, another major artery through the city. Morning and evening commutes will become even more difficult as travelers scramble to find detours around the damage.

Atlanta, a major economic and transportation hub in the southeastern United States, is notorious for its rush hour gridlock. Earlier this year, a survey of over 1,000 cities throughout the world ranked Atlanta as the eighth most congested city in the world, putting the severity of

its commuter delays near that of Los Angeles, and well ahead of Paris, France and Miami, Florida. Traffic delays have steadily worsened as the city's population has swelled.

While Representative John Lewis has promised that the federal government would provide \$10 million to help reconstruct the bridge, construction is expected to take months. Georgia Department of Transportation officials have asked commuters to consider taking public transit to reduce the burden of traffic during construction. However, Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), Atlanta's public transit system, is already insufficient for a city so heavily traveled.

Atlanta's population has grown steadily, as has its importance as a major hub for air travel in the Southeast. MARTA has not expanded along with these factors, however, and only offers four lines that form a simple T-shape in the middle of a city whose highway map resembles a complex tangle of veins. The bus and train lines offer no offshoots that would allow commuters access to the outer edges of the sprawling city where many commuters live.

The backward state of Atlanta's transit system is on par with Georgia's infrastructure in general. The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the state's infrastructure a grade of C overall, with a D- for transit and a C- for bridge maintenance.

While this is a shockingly abysmal score, given Georgia's importance as a regional and national transportation hub, it is emblematic of the state of infrastructure in the United States as a whole. ASCE gave the US an overall grade of D+ for infrastructure; its scores for transit and bridge maintenance are almost identical to Georgia's.

The collapse of the I85 overpass highlights the

serious decay of America's infrastructure. Ironically, the collapse occurred on the same day that the White House released the first details of an infrastructure plan.

US Transportation Department Secretary Elaine Chao announced that President Donald Trump proposed to channel \$1 trillion over 10 years towards improving the nation's infrastructure. Chao called Trump's plan "a strategic, targeted program of investment valued at \$1 trillion over 10 years." She further stated that the proposal would "cover more than transportation infrastructure; it will include energy, water and potentially broadband and veterans' hospitals as well."

Chao did not offer a definitive timeline for the release of Trump's plan, nor did she mention how much new federal funding would be proposed. She did, however, make it clear that the plan would not directly fund improvements nor would the government directly build new infrastructure. To the contrary, it would be centered on "public-private partnerships," which she implied would speed the processes for various projects.

Trump's proposed \$16.2 billion budget for the Department of Transportation, made public earlier this month, represents a funding reduction of 13 percent. The budget would eliminate subsidies that currently allow Amtrak to operate long-distance rail services, as well as \$499 million in federal grants that have been used to fund transportation projects ranging from high-speed intercity rail systems to highway construction.

Chao's brief hints about Trump's infrastructure proposal make it clear that the US should prepare for more drastic cuts as Trump's proposed "public-private partnerships" pour funds into private companies at the public's expense.

For a city like Atlanta, whose infrastructure has not kept up with the city's economic growth, Trump's proposal can only make things more difficult for those who are already forced to reckon with unnecessary congestion and inferior transit options. Atlanta's poorest workers, who currently rely upon MARTA, will suffer even more.

For cities like Detroit, which have been devastated by serious economic decline, the budget will be an abject disaster. Even more bridges in need of repair will crumble, and unlike the I85 collapse, which occurred in an affluent neighborhood where a well-equipped fire department could respond promptly, these infrastructure failures will not result in mere

inconvenience, but in massive fatalities.

Trump has made it clear that the public good is subordinate to private profit, but America's failing infrastructure, like the citizens it serves, has been the victim of bipartisan attacks on the working class. Seemingly endless funds are channeled into war and domestic spying programs, funded by cuts in education, health care and infrastructure. Democrats and Republicans alike have worked to protect Wall Street predators who inflated the housing bubble and orchestrated municipal bankruptcies. These same predators will benefit from Trump's infrastructure proposals and the expense of the working class.



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