

Baltimore's Key Bridge was one of dozens potentially at risk across US

Ray Coleman
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The United States National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) has released its findings regarding the collapse of the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore last year.

On March 26, 2024, the bridge was struck by the Singapore-based container ship *MV Dali*. The collapse led to the deaths of six construction workers, who were on the bridge at the time, and untold economic damages for the Chesapeake Bay region.

Six workers were repairing the bridge in the early morning hours when the *Dali* struck the bridge—Alejandro Hernandez Fuentes; Dorlian Ronial Castillo Cabrera; Maynor Yasir Suazo-Sandoval; Carlos Daniel Hernández; Miguel Angel Luna Gonzalez and Jose Mynor Lopez. They died after plunging into the icy Patapsco River nearly 200 feet below. Two workers who fell into the river were rescued and survived.

The Key Bridge was opened in 1977 after five years of construction and served as a vital transport link in the Baltimore region, particularly for hazmat freight. Such freight is not allowed to enter the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel or the Fort McHenry Tunnel, which serve the region's main I-95 interstate connecting the East Coast of the US.

It was one of the longest continuous truss bridges in the world before its collapse.

At the time of the catastrophic collapse, the Socialist Equality Party declared that this event “expresses the collision between the needs of a modern, mass society and the outmoded capitalist system.” When it comes to upgrading old bridges to withstand the risks of collisions with modern-day container ships, the SEP wrote, “The question is not a lack of resources, but who controls them.”

The NTSB investigation determined that the Key

Bridge was nearly 30 times above the acceptable threshold set by the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO). This was due to the bridge being built before vulnerability assessments were required.

AASHTO created its vulnerability assessment calculation in 1991 following the collapse of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in Tampa Bay, Florida, in 1980. As with the Key Bridge, the Sunshine Skyway collapsed after being struck by a container ship, leading to the deaths of 35 people.

Beginning in 1994, the Federal Highway Administration in the US began requiring all newly built bridges to minimize their risk of catastrophic failure in the event of a vessel collision. Bridges built before 1994 were not required to implement upgrades.

The NTSB accident report concluded that if the state of Maryland had

conducted a vulnerability assessment of the Francis Scott Key Bridge based on recent vessel traffic, as recommended by the 1991 and 2009 AASHTO Guide Specifications, the MDTA [Maryland Transportation Authority] would have been aware that this critical/essential bridge was above the AASHTO threshold of risk for catastrophic collapse from a vessel collision when the *Dali* collision occurred.

The report concluded that

had the MDTA conducted a vulnerability assessment of the Key Bridge using

AASHTO's Method II vulnerability assessment calculation, the MDTA would have had information to proactively identify strategies to reduce the risk of a collapse and loss of lives associated with a vessel collision with the bridge.

Significantly, the regulatory agency said it had “identified 68 other bridges frequented by ocean-going vessels” like the MV *Dali* that were built before the AASHTO guidance was created and have never “undergone a vulnerability assessment based on recent vessel traffic.” Such structures “have an unknown level of risk of collapse from a vessel collision.”

While the NTSB did not conclude that these 68 other bridges have the same risk of collapse as the Key Bridge did, it urged the 30 organizations that own these bridges—mostly local or state agencies, the US Army Corps of Engineers, as well as two private corporations—evaluate whether the bridges meet the acceptable risk standard from AASHTO.

Although it is authorized only to conduct fact-finding proceedings and not to assign fault or blame in its investigations, the NTSB report explodes some of the narrative on the bridge collapse pushed by the administration of former US President Joe Biden and the state of Maryland and City of Baltimore.

The latter presented the catastrophe either as a freak accident or as a result of negligence on behalf of the ship's owner and operator, Grace Ocean Private Limited and Synergy Marine Private Limited, which last October reached a \$102 million settlement with the US Department of Justice.

A year ago, when then-President Biden toured the site of the bridge collapse, he said the US government's “first priority” was to reopen the economically vital Port of Baltimore, which was almost entirely closed off by the wreckage of the former bridge span. The port is the country's largest automotive port, being geographically the closest on the Atlantic coast to the industrial Midwest. It is also a key facility for US military and weapons shipments abroad.

In its settlement over the cost of the bridge cleanup, the Justice Department claimed that the MV *Dali* was “improperly maintained and configured in a way that violated safety regulations and norms for international

shipping.” It stated that, due to “negligence, mismanagement, and, at times, a desire to cut costs, they [the ship's operators] configured the ship's electrical and mechanical systems in a way that prevented those systems from being able to quickly restore propulsion and steering after a power outage” onboard the ship which made it impossible to avoid hitting the bridge pillar.

Never did the Justice Department or high-level officials suggest that Maryland leaders should have known about the vulnerabilities of the Key Bridge.

This was the case even though the American Society for Civil Engineers (ASCE) has routinely issued damning reports of the state of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure in the United States, including in its “2025 Report Card for America's Infrastructure.” The latter predicts an investment gap of \$3.7 trillion between the resources that are needed for new and existing infrastructure versus what will actually be invested between 2024 and 2033.



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