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Not even half of U.S. roads earn 'good' rating

32% of Michigan roads in poor condition, 12% bridges are deficient

A hilly, winding road in New Fairfield, Conn., is cracked and recessed on the edges. Almost half the state's major roads are rated 'poor.' / Robert Deutsch, /USA Today

NEW FAIRFIELD, CONN. — Cracked asphalt jolts cars on a less-than-1-mile stretch of Connecticut road, making it clear why state transportation officials grade the pavement as being in poor condition.

Edges of the two-lane road that connects Route 39 to the New York border — a sign says Col. Henry Ludington passed by in 1777 to repel "British raiders" — are worn, allowing rainwater to pool.

Connecticut has the nation's second-highest percentage of major roads — 48 percent, or 1,268 miles — with pavement in "poor" condition, and 25 other states have 20 percent or more in such condition, according to an analysis of the Federal Highway Administration's most recent data by transportation research group TRIP and USA Today.
Michigan has 32 percent of major roads in poor condition.

Just 38 percent of the pavement on roads stretching miles across the U.S. is in "good" condition, according to the analysis, while about one in 10 of the nation's bridges are "structurally deficient."

The analysis concludes that the nation's roadways are in disrepair, and even states with mostly "good" roads have stretches of pavement, as well as bridges, that are in dire need of upgrades.

State, federal and local funding levels for road and bridge improvements are not adequate to meet the nation's growing needs. About $85 billion is required annually to improve the condition of roads and bridges — nearly double what was spent in 2008, according to the Department of Transportation's 2010 report to Congress.

'Rippled like a washboard'

Route 9 in south-central New Jersey is what suburban highway deterioration looks like.

Its original concrete slabs were laid in the 1930s, and numerous repaving projects over the concrete have since made its pavement resemble an old pair of blue jeans — still intact but patched and stitched together.

Route 9's busier sections take a daily beating of almost 80,000 vehicles, including commuter buses and large trucks not permitted on the Garden State Parkway north of Exit 105.

"It's rippled like a washboard — you hydroplane when it's wet," says motorist Lloyd Stone of Manalapan.

The cumulative cost isn't just about dollars and cents. Though poor pavement conditions do cost consumers billions annually in vehicle repairs and operating costs, safety is undermined in the worst cases. Slower travel and delayed freight transportation can also increase costs for motorists and industries.

The TRIP/USA Today analysis, which looked at data for all roads eligible for federal highway funds, shows a higher percentage of miles of pavement in poor condition in 2011 (21.4 percent) than in 2008 (20.7 percent).

Though the increase was slight, it is significant because the dip comes in the wake of $27 billion in federal stimulus money to improve roads and bridges. That jolt of funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 improved 42,000 miles of road and 2,700 bridges.

Kansas tops the list

Kansas had the highest percentage — 52 percent — of miles of pavement in poor condition, with Connecticut following closely. Then came New Jersey, 45 percent; Hawaii, 39 percent; California, 37 percent; and Oklahoma, 36 percent. Michigan came in ninth place with 32 percent.

Kansas has a much higher overall percentage of pavement in poor condition because many of the state's secondary roads are in disrepair. Yet its major roads and interstate highways — which carry the bulk of traffic — are better off, with only 6 percent in poor condition.

"If one looks at vehicle miles traveled, our roads are not considered poor," says Kansas Department of Transportation spokesman Steve Swartz.

Jerry Younger, the department's deputy secretary and the state's transportation engineer, says Kansas doesn't have the financial resources to improve secondary roads and — like many other states — must focus on the most-traveled ones.

The Federal Highway Administration says the picture of America's roadways is better than the one painted by the USA Today analysis. The agency says the debate should focus on roads with more traffic.

Using such a measure, the FHWA says its data show that the share of travel occurring on roads in good condition improved from 46 percent in 2008 to 48 percent in 2011. Yet, like the TRIP/USA Today analysis, the FHWA analysis shows that the percentage of travel occurring on roads in poor condition increased slightly from 15 percent in 2008 to 15.3 percent in 2011.

U.S. bridges falling

Many bridges are also withering. About 11 percent of the nation's bridges are "structurally deficient," and about 14 percent are "functionally obsolete," the analysis of FHWA data for bridges 20 feet or longer shows.

In five states — Pennsylvania, Iowa, Oklahoma, Rhode Island and South Dakota — at least 20 percent of bridges are structurally deficient or require "significant maintenance, rehabilitation or replacement," according to the American Society of Civil Engineers. These structures must be inspected at least every year because "critical load-carrying elements" were found in poor condition.

In Michigan, 12 percent of bridges are structurally deficient.

A bridge is classified as functionally obsolete if its design is outdated. It may have lower load-carrying capacity, narrower shoulders or less clearance underneath than bridges built to current standards.

The FHWA says the terms "structurally deficient" or "functionally obsolete" are not a reflection of a bridge's safety, and immediate action is taken if inspectors find an unsafe one.

The Sherman Minton Bridge, which spans the Ohio River between Indiana and Kentucky, was ordered closed by Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels in 2011 after it was found unsafe, the FHWA says. It has since been repaired and reopened.

Transportation for America, a Washington-based policy organization, reports that the average age of a bridge in America is 42 years, and more than 200 million trips are taken daily across deficient bridges in the nation's 102 largest metropolitan areas