The Federal Bridge Program

How States Under-Fund Bridge Safety

The bridge program provides federal assistance to repair or replace aging bridge infrastructure. Even though over 80,000 bridges are still dangerously unsafe, bridge repair remains a low priority in many states, and billions of dollars in bridge program funding has been diverted to other uses.

The bridge program dates to 1978, when Congress greatly expanded funding to address a bridge system that was rapidly deteriorating and threatening public safety. As recently as 1992, 1 in 5 bridges nationwide were classified as structurally deficient*. The bridge program is designed to address this threat head-on; each state receives funds based on its share of the total cost to repair or replace all deficient bridges nationwide. Thus all states have access to the funds necessary to make essential repairs.

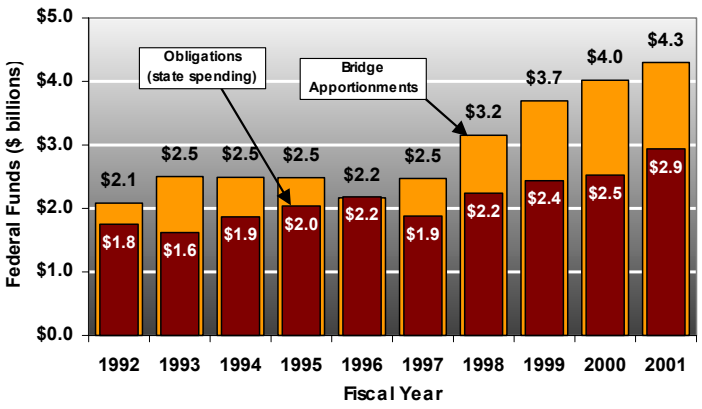
Bridge Safety a Low Priority in Many States

Although Congress has allocated $29.3 billion to the bridge program over the last ten fiscal years, many bridges continue to have chronic safety problems. Bridge quality has improved overall since ISTEA was enacted, but even today, over 83,000 bridges – 14% – are structurally deficient. Off-system (local) bridges are especially troubling, with deficiency rates over twice that of their on-system (federal) counterparts.

A deeper look reveals significant differences among states in bridge improvement rates. While a number of states have made significant progress on bridge repair, several states have made dangerously little progress. 12 states actually have *more* structurally deficient bridges today than they did a decade ago.

Why has bridge safety declined in some states while it improves in others? Although the bridge program is designed to put federal dollars where they're most needed, many states fail to take full advantage of the funding available to them. Overall, the states have spent only 73% of the bridge funding allocated by Congress over the last decade—the lowest obligation rate of TEA-21's five core programs. And the trend is getting worse; states have used only 67% of bridge funds allocated during the first four years of TEA-21. The result is that billions of bridge program dollars—nearly $8 billion since ISTEA's enactment—have been diverted to other programs and priorities.

Bridge Program Under-Spending, 1993-2001



* FHWA defines structurally deficient bridges as those that "have been restricted to light vehicles, require immediate rehabilitation to remain open, or are closed." This classification is distinct from "functionally obsolete," which are bridges whose capacities no longer support the roads they service. Some studies combine the two categories, and therefore report even higher rates of bridge deficiency than those reported here.

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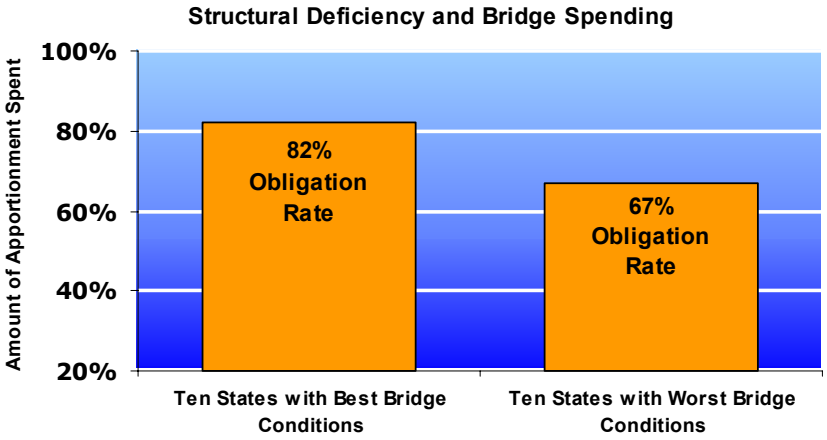
How States Short-Change Bridge Repair

States that under-fund bridge safety do so in a variety of ways. Most take advantage of a loophole in the TEA-21 funding mechanism resulting from the discrepancy between state apportionments, which are specified by program (Interstate Maintenance, Bridge, etc.), and obligation authority, which is not. As detailed in STPP's decoder, "The Transportation Funding Loophole," it is left to states to decide how to allocate overall budget dollars among various programs. Often, states use their discretion to fully fund traditional highway building programs while under-funding critical repair needs like the bridge program. Several such states are ones that the bridge program's funding formula is designed to help the most.

Another diversion technique involves the Discretionary Bridge Program, which provides bridge funding on a project-specific basis. To be eligible for discretionary funds, a state must not have transferred any of its apportioned bridge funds to other uses. But some states use the loophole described above to divert bridge dollars elsewhere without losing eligibility for discretionary funds. For example, in FY 2000-2001, Illinois received over $12 million in discretionary bridge funding, even though it obligated only 52% of its regular apportionment during that same time, and shifted millions to other programs. By under-obligating its bridge program, the state was able to "transfer" its bridge funds elsewhere and *still* receive discretionary funds without incurring any penalty.

A state-by-state comparison shows the difference between states that use their bridge program dollars and those that don't.

As shown in the graph above, the ten states with the best bridge conditions



have spent 82% of their federally apportioned bridge funds since 1992. By contrast, the ten states with the worst bridges have spent only 67% of their bridge funds since 1992. For example, Pennsylvania, with nearly 25% of its bridges deemed structurally deficient, has left unused or transferred over $1.2 billion in bridge program funding (see Table 1 below).

But while Pennsylvania is the most striking example of bridge under-funding, most states are guilty to some degree. Overall, states have neglected nearly $8 billion apportioned for bridge repair, choosing instead to focus on new construction projects and other priorities. This shift in funding dollars violates the intent and spirit of the original legislation, which was to allocate bridge funding based on where it was most needed.

Sources:

Federal Highway Administration. *Conditions and Performance Report,* 1999
Federal Highway Administration. *Financing Federal-Aid Highways,* 1999.
STPP, Analysis of FHWA Bridge Classification Information
STPP, "The Transportation Funding Loophole," *Decoding Transportation Policy & Practice #5.*

For further information, see:

http://www.transact.org **http://www.antc.net**
http://www.tea3.org

Table 1. Bridge Program Apportionments and Obligations By State, Ranked by Structural Deficiency Rate (Dollar amounts in millions)

Rank: Most Defic.	State	% Struc. Defic. Bridges 2001	Number of Structurally Deficient Bridges 2001	Bridge Apportionments (1992-2001)	Bridge Obligations (1992-2001)	% Of Funds Obligated	Unobligated Balance, Bridge Program*
50	Oklahoma	33.5%	7,605	$516.2	$407.0	78.8%	$125.2
49	Missouri	25.8%	6,083	$960.8	$674.2	70.2%	$209.1
48	Rhode island	25.0%	187	$232.5	$160.3	69.0%	$73.5
47	Pennsylvania	24.7%	5,390	$2,883.5	$1,627.1	56.4%	$125.5
46	South Dakota	23.3%	1,398	$108.4	$79.8	73.6%	$28.0
45	Mississippi	22.0%	3,694	$427.2	$364.1	85.2%	$70.4
44	Iowa	20.1%	5,036	$431.9	$238.3	55.2%	$140.9
43	North Dakota	19.3%	871	$72.3	$55.5	76.7%	$19.7
42	Michigan	18.9%	2,012	$841.9	$630.9	74.9%	$211.0
41	Louisiana	18.2%	2,425	$686.5	$560.0	81.6%	$140.7
40	Hawaii	18.0%	193	$185.0	$135.3	73.2%	$47.8
39	West Virginia	17.3%	1,172	$561.6	$490.4	87.3%	$103.8
38	Nebraska	17.3%	2,676	$263.7	$196.5	74.5%	$7.6
37	Alabama	17.1%	2,677	$526.0	$414.5	78.8%	$111.3
36	Vermont	16.7%	452	$154.8	$129.7	83.8%	$26.5
35	New Hampshire	16.4%	386	$155.2	$116.8	75.3%	$45.6
34	Maine	15.0%	354	$188.0	$145.1	77.2%	$28.6
33	North Carolina	14.8%	2,513	$795.9	$676.2	85.0%	$129.8
32	New Jersey	14.6%	930	$1,438.8	$1,273.2	88.5%	$120.7
31	Utah	14.2%	389	$126.4	$89.4	70.7%	$34.4
30	Massachusetts	14.0%	696	$1,157.1	$751.6	65.0%	$140.5
29	New York	13.8%	2,405	$2,929.5	$2,444.0	83.4%	$413.6
28	Wisconsin	13.8%	1,862	$324.9	$321.2	98.8%	$21.9
27	Kansas	13.5%	3,465	$438.7	$337.4	76.9%	$64.9
26	South Carolina	13.1%	1,187	$341.5	$324.8	95.1%	$28.7
25	Wyoming	12.6%	389	$71.9	$59.4	82.6%	$8.2
24	Indiana	12.5%	2,257	$387.7	$326.4	84.2%	$64.7
23	Arkansas	11.9%	1,479	$348.1	$313.8	90.1%	$36.0
22	Ohio	11.8%	3,305	$1,086.7	$733.1	67.5%	$285.0
21	Alaska	11.8%	169	$150.2	$69.9	46.5%	$50.7
20	Montana	11.4%	570	$137.5	$125.9	91.6%	$4.9
19	California	11.1%	2,631	$2,067.2	$851.9	41.2%	$619.9
18	Georgia	11.0%	1,578	$543.2	$413.8	76.2%	$159.9
17	Illinois	10.7%	2,725	$1,000.6	$806.5	80.6%	$193.7
16	Virginia	9.6%	1,222	$674.4	$283.8	42.1%	$150.2
15	Minnesota	9.5%	1,221	$260.1	$227.5	87.5%	$67.5
14	New Mexico	9.2%	348	$91.0	$61.3	67.4%	$29.7
13	Tennessee	9.1%	1,760	$615.9	$469.8	76.3%	$150.1
12	Kentucky	8.8%	1,189	$393.0	$331.7	84.4%	$71.5
11	Maryland	8.8%	436	$450.1	$259.7	57.7%	$75.7
10	Connecticut	8.7%	362	$681.0	$570.8	83.8%	$123.5
9	Idaho	7.9%	320	$88.4	$69.6	78.8%	$20.5
8	Colorado	7.4%	596	$226.4	$217.8	96.2%	$16.4
7	Washington	6.9%	551	$748.5	$591.6	79.0%	$189.9
6	Texas	6.6%	3,182	$1,188.1	$925.8	77.9%	$202.3
5	Delaware	5.7%	47	$93.9	$61.9	66.0%	$33.7
4	Oregon	5.0%	362	$404.4	$274.1	67.8%	$58.0
3	Nevada	4.4%	67	$76.7	$56.2	73.2%	$20.6
2	Arizona	2.8%	194	$81.2	$67.7	83.3%	$10.0
1	Florida	2.7%	300	$580.5	$563.4	97.1%	$10.2
	Total	**14.2%**	**83,318**	**$29,195.0**	**$21,376.4**	**73.2%**	**$5,122.9**

*Because of transfers out of the Bridge program into other road programs, the unobligated balance (the unspent apportionment) for the Bridge program is not equal to the difference between apportionment and obligation.

Table 2. Structurally Deficient Bridges (Percent), by Federal-Aid System (On or Off System*), 1992 and 2001

State	1992 Local (Off System) Bridges	1992 Federal-Aid (On System) Bridges	1992 All Bridges	2001 Local (Off System) Bridges	2001 Federal-Aid (On System) Bridges	2001 All Bridges	Percentage-Point Change, 1992-2001 All Bridges
All U.S. States	**29%**	**13%**	**21%**	**20%**	**9%**	**14%**	**-7%**
Alabama	35%	11%	23%	26%	9%	17%	-6%
Alaska	21%	7%	10%	12%	11%	12%	2%
Arizona	8%	1%	3%	6%	2%	3%	0%
Arkansas	43%	10%	23%	21%	6%	12%	-11%
California	12%	4%	6%	12%	11%	11%	5%
Colorado	21%	8%	14%	9%	6%	7%	-7%
Connecticut	18%	14%	15%	16%	6%	9%	-6%
Delaware	13%	9%	10%	8%	4%	6%	-5%
Florida	7%	2%	4%	6%	1%	3%	-1%
Georgia	29%	8%	17%	19%	5%	11%	-6%
Hawaii	14%	15%	15%	25%	16%	18%	3%
Idaho	15%	6%	11%	10%	6%	8%	-3%
Illinois	21%	14%	18%	12%	9%	11%	-7%
Indiana	28%	10%	20%	18%	5%	12%	-8%
Iowa	22%	9%	19%	25%	10%	20%	1%
Kansas	31%	8%	21%	20%	5%	14%	-8%
Kentucky	19%	5%	13%	12%	4%	9%	-5%
Louisiana	22%	26%	25%	27%	9%	18%	-7%
Maine	20%	12%	15%	21%	10%	15%	-1%
Maryland	14%	7%	10%	12%	6%	9%	-2%
Massachusetts	28%	15%	18%	17%	13%	14%	-4%
Michigan	30%	19%	23%	22%	17%	19%	-5%
Minnesota	19%	11%	16%	12%	7%	10%	-6%
Mississippi	43%	25%	33%	31%	12%	22%	-11%
Missouri	50%	24%	40%	32%	17%	26%	-14%
Montana	18%	4%	10%	19%	3%	11%	1%
Nebraska	39%	12%	30%	23%	6%	17%	-13%
Nevada	12%	3%	5%	9%	3%	4%	-1%
New Hampshire	30%	13%	21%	23%	10%	16%	-4%
New Jersey	32%	22%	25%	19%	13%	15%	-10%
New Mexico	13%	6%	8%	14%	8%	9%	1%
New York	63%	52%	57%	18%	10%	14%	-43%
North Carolina	27%	17%	23%	17%	11%	15%	-9%
North Dakota	37%	6%	25%	29%	5%	19%	-6%
Ohio	18%	14%	16%	15%	7%	12%	-4%
Oklahoma	48%	17%	35%	50%	20%	33%	-1%
Oregon	14%	7%	9%	6%	4%	5%	-4%
Pennsylvania	28%	23%	25%	27%	22%	25%	-1%
Rhode Island	28%	16%	18%	29%	24%	25%	7%
South Carolina	17%	6%	11%	15%	11%	13%	2%
South Dakota	33%	8%	22%	32%	13%	23%	1%
Tennessee	25%	14%	20%	12%	7%	9%	-11%
Texas	27%	4%	13%	14%	2%	7%	-6%
Utah	21%	10%	14%	15%	14%	14%	0%
Vermont	32%	14%	23%	17%	16%	17%	-6%
Virginia	14%	9%	11%	12%	8%	10%	-2%
Washington	9%	13%	11%	7%	7%	7%	-4%
West Virginia	28%	24%	26%	18%	17%	17%	-9%
Wisconsin	28%	22%	25%	16%	11%	14%	-11%
Wyoming	26%	2%	10%	22%	7%	13%	3%

*Bridges that are eligible for federal-aid highway funds are commonly called "On-system" bridges, as opposed to "Off-system" bridges. Off-system bridges tend to serve local needs more and to be owned by local government. Federal funds provided through the Bridge Program are available to all types of bridges, with at least 65% going to On-system bridges and at least 15% going to Off-system bridges.