



Not Making the Grade in North Carolina

By Andrew Brod

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When the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed into the Mississippi River earlier this month, it got a lot of people's attention. After all, it's scary to imagine driving across a bridge and have it give way beneath you. It's nerve-racking to watch divers search for bodies, and it's sad to see families dealing with their grief. The bridge collapse got my attention too. I attended the University of Minnesota in the 1980s and I drove across that bridge many times.

As is often the case, it takes a major event like this to get everyone thinking about the underlying issue. Even though the I-35W bridge wasn't especially old, people are beginning to realize that America's infrastructure is aging and in need of maintenance and improvement. It's not just our bridges and roads, but also our systems for drinking water and wastewater, our dams and our airports.

A single day last month served as a prelude to the Minneapolis bridge collapse. Early in the morning of July 18, a cracked water pipe beneath Wendover Avenue in Greensboro caused a sinkhole that swallowed a car and disrupted traffic for days. Later that same day, an underground steam pipe in New York City exploded and sent a plume of steam over 1000 feet in the air. The explosion killed one person and injured many others.

Both the steam pipe in New York and the water pipe in Greensboro dated from the 1920s.

But a few examples can't give us the whole picture. What's the overall condition of North Carolina's infrastructure? The state's chapter of the American Society of Civil Engineers issued a report card just last year on the following nine areas: airports, bridges, dams, drinking water, rail, roads, schools, storm water, and wastewater. The result is one of those good-news-bad-news deals.

The good news is that North Carolina's infrastructure is in slightly better shape than the national average. And we didn't receive a failing grade. The bad news is that North Carolina's C- grade (as compared to the national grade of D) means that much work and much money are needed.

Airports: D+

Throughout the country this year, travellers have experienced unprecedented delays. According to the federal government, the percentage of on-time flights has declined each year since 2003. There are various reasons for this frustrating trend, and possible solutions include changes in regulation. But an aging infrastructure hasn't helped. The ASCE notes that at its current funding levels, the state will be able to address only the very worst problems of cracked pavements, etc.

Bridges: C-

ASCE claims that one in three of North Carolina's nearly 18,000 bridges are "structurally deficient or functionally obsolete," which are words I will try to forget the next time I cross the I-85 bridge over the Yadkin River near Salisbury. In some communities, according to ASCE, ambulances and other service vehicles must make long detours to avoid problem bridges. Roughly \$8 billion is needed to repair these bridges, and that's in addition to the roughly \$200 million per year that the Carolinas chapter of the American Automobile Association estimates is needed just for maintenance. (The state legislature set aside much less than that in this year's budget).

Dams: D

The state's 5,250 dams receive a grade of D because more than a fifth of them are classified as "high hazard." ASCE also claims that only 20 percent of the high-hazard dams have emergency plans on record, and *none* of those meet federal guidelines.

Drinking water: C+

ASCE argues that the state needs to invest \$2.5 billion over the next five years in order to replace aging equipment and comply with federal drinking-water standards. A further \$4.5 billion will be needed through 2030.

Rail: B-

The state needs to increase rail capacity and improve tracks and signaling equipment, but ASCE gives North Carolina's rail system a pretty good grade of B-. Even so, it argues that freight infrastructure will require \$545 million over the next 25 years, and passenger rail upgrades will require nearly \$3 billion.

Roads: D

Once known as the "Good Roads State," North Carolina has let its high-quality roadways deteriorate. A recent former governor declared that he wanted no place in the state to be more than 10 minutes from a limited-access highway, but he should have focused on maintaining existing roads. The *News & Record* reported that the state legislature adjourned this summer "without finding a way to cover the estimated shortfall in North Carolina's transportation spending needs, projected to reach \$65 billion over the next two decades." ASCE estimates this shortfall at about \$29 billion.

Schools: C-

Forty-six percent of all public school facilities in North Carolina will require renovation within the next five years, according to the ASCE.

Storm water: C-

More than three-quarters of North Carolina's cities and towns report that their storm-water systems are in fair or poor condition.

Wastewater: C–

Wastewater is the flipside to drinking water, and the needs are similar. More than \$3.4 billion is needed over the next five years to replace aging facilities and comply with federal clean-water standards, and a further \$4 billion will be needed through 2030.

Taken together, these grades add up to an overall grade of C– for North Carolina’s infrastructure. ASCE estimates that the cost of making the necessary repairs and improvements will total \$95 billion over the next 20 years.

The question now is whether our state legislators and our delegation in Congress will make the tough spending decisions necessary to upgrade and improve North Carolina’s infrastructure. As a state employee whose salary is also determined by the legislature, I must admit that these huge sums of money make me a bit nervous. But sensible investment in infrastructure is good for the economy.

To be sure, “sensible” means avoiding wrong-headed projects like Alaska’s notorious “Bridge to Nowhere,” a product of the pork-laden 2006 federal transportation bill. But that’s where we voters come in. Will we put pressure on our representatives, whether in Raleigh or Washington, to maintain the essential physical building blocks of our economy?

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