

ROAD TO SAFETY

Nation's Aging Bridges In Need Of Repair, Funding

(NAPSA)—A new study has found that our nation's bridges are not aging gracefully. Approximately one in four major bridges is approaching middle age, and is in need of repair or replacement because of deterioration or because it no longer meets current design standards.

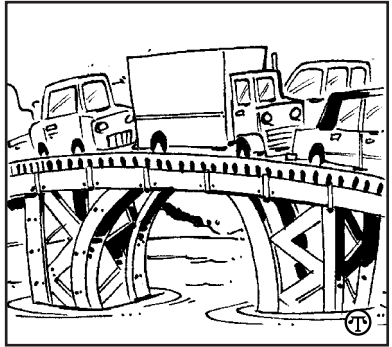
An analysis of federal data shows that 14 percent of the nation's bridges are structurally deficient, meaning that they show significant deterioration to decks and other major components. An additional 14 percent are classified as functionally obsolete. Functionally obsolete bridges no longer meet modern design standards for safety features, or are no longer able to accommodate the volume of traffic they carry.

The study, "Showing Their Age: The Nation's Bridges at 40," by The Road Information Program (TRIP), a national non-profit highway transportation group, also identified the 10 states with the highest percentage of bridges rated as structurally deficient. The top ten are: Oklahoma, Missouri, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Mississippi, Iowa, North Dakota, Michigan and Louisiana.

Urban bridges that carry heavy traffic, especially in older cities like Boston, New York and St. Louis, are showing the most significant deterioration.

Nearly half of the nation's bridges—48 percent—were built between 1950 and 1980, with the 1960s being the greatest bridge-building era, when 19 percent of the bridges open to traffic were built. Sixty percent of bridges are at least 30 years old, while 41 percent are at least 40 years old.

"Our bridges are a visible sign of an aging and overburdened roadway system," said William M. Wilkins, TRIP's executive director. "Increased funding has resulted in a small reduction in the percentage of the nation's deficient bridges since 1995. However, the tremendous growth in car and truck travel, combined with funding shortfalls in many states, may reverse that progress."



The number of cars and trucks on America's highways is increasing, many of the nation's bridges aren't up to the challenge.

The situation is expected to worsen in the coming years, as highway traffic increases. "The entire nation is seeing significant increases in traffic volumes, particularly of commercial trucks, which will accelerate the rate of bridge deterioration," noted Wilkins.

Vehicle travel nationally increased by 28 percent between 1990 and 2000. Similarly, travel by large commercial trucks increased by 40 percent between 1990 and 2000, significantly increasing the load being carried by bridges. Vehicle travel by all vehicles is expected to increase by another 50 percent by the year 2020 and travel by large commercial trucks is expected to increase by 90 percent by the year 2020, according to Federal Highway Administration forecasts.

Improving all the nation's bridges to good condition will require an increase in funding for bridge repairs. Improved bridge maintenance practices and the use of improved construction materials would help keep bridges in good shape.

A U.S. Department of Transportation report stated that investment in our nation's bridges should be increased by 44 percent to bring bridges up to good condition. Congress will have an opportunity in 2003 to increase funding for bridges when the long-term federal highway program is scheduled to be reauthorized.