



# Transportation boosters struggle to build a bridge over the word 'infrastructure'

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Short-term, the Highway Trust Fund is at risk of going broke. Down the road, the nation's public works require trillions of dollars' worth of upgrades and repairs, according to one oft-cited report card.

But advocates seeking to rally grass-roots support for more government spending first have to grapple with a forbidding four-syllable word that's heard a lot these days on Capitol Hill.

"Infrastructure."

"I don't know who invented the word, 'infrastructure,'" Rep. Marcy Kaptur (D-Ohio) exclaimed earlier this year. "A lot of my constituents can't even pronounce it." Kaptur, whose comments came during a House Appropriations Committee debate over transportation spending, quickly added that she has plenty of constituents complaining about potholes.

But making the connection between rutted roads and big-picture federal policy is a challenge, advocates acknowledge.

Historically, "it's been a difficult issue to break through on," said Rich Greer, director of strategic communications for the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), whose members depend heavily on road and bridge projects to make a living.

But the union and other organizations with a stake in the debate are trying, via eye-catching props and social media. Under its "Getting Schooled in Infrastructure" campaign, LIUNA features a school bus swathed in police tape with a slab of concrete -- a symbol of a chunk of falling bridge -- embedded in its windshield.

The infrastructure debate isn't about concrete or steel, Greer said. "It's about people's lives."

The bus, towed from stop to stop, is part of a rolling campaign that has so far spanned more than a dozen states and some 70 congressional districts. That campaign also lives online. "Wake Up

America," entreats two websites -- [repairourroads.org](http://repairourroads.org) and [fixourbridges.org](http://fixourbridges.org) --- that urge passage of a long-term highway funding bill and offer readers a route for targeting members of Congress with phone and Twitter messages.

On a similar path, the "[Dire States](#)" campaign, funded by Wisconsin-based Case Construction Equipment, has sent a rusted 1949 Hudson around the country for months at a time. Although the campaign focuses on state and local initiatives to boost public works spending, the car was prominently parked around downtown Washington, D.C., in May during Infrastructure Week 2014, a series of events intended to draw attention to the issue.

This school bus, featuring a prop to represent a fallen bridge fragment, is the main attraction in a campaign by the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA) to put pressure on Congress to pass a long-term transportation bill. Photo courtesy of LIUNA.

Building America's Future, an advocacy group made up of current and former elected officials, this month unveiled an "I'm Stuck" mobile app, billed as giving delayed commuters the chance to share their real-time frustration with members of Congress via email. And the American Road and Transportation Builders Association has launched a digital primer that uses easy-to-digest vignettes to explain where gas tax revenue goes, coupled with a breakout on the "cost of inaction."

"People's eyes glaze over when you talk about trillion-dollar capital needs," said Pete Ruane, the group's president and CEO, in announcing the [Transportation Makes America Work website](#) last month. "We're presenting facts in ways that families can talk about transportation issues around the dinner table -- so they can understand where their gas tax dollars are going and why."

The outreach blitz comes as the federal government's framework for paying for road and transit projects is itself buckling.

The Highway Trust Fund's roadbuilding account is on track to run dry in barely a month, according to the Department of Transportation. Although Congress is poised to approve an almost \$11 billion bailout next week, lawmakers are gridlocked on the creation of a lasting strategy to head off future crises ([E&E Daily](#) July 23).

Over the next decade, the trust fund will need at least \$130 billion in general Treasury revenues to avoid spending cutbacks, the Congressional Budget Office recently projected. For the laborers union, the road builders and other leading business lobbies, the logical alternative is a hike in the 18.4-cents-per-gallon federal gas tax, unchanged since 1993.

This rusty 1949 Hudson Commodore Eight is the centerpiece of a construction equipment manufacturer's campaign to draw attention to the condition of U.S. roads, levees and other infrastructure. Photo by Sean Reilly.

Although a handful of states, such as Wyoming and Maryland, have raised their fuel levies in the last two years, an increase in the federal tax is taboo to many congressional Republicans, particularly those allied with the tea party.

At the Eno Center for Transportation, Joshua Schank doubted that the current campaigns, driven by groups invested in the outcome, will sway public opinion or, by extension, Congress.

Although Washington, D.C., accounts for about one-quarter of road and transit spending, according to the budget office, it's states and local governments that decide how most of that money will actually be used. The federal government's role is ill-defined with a "very high" learning curve for the average person trying to fundamentally understand it, said Schank, who is president of the nonpartisan think tank.

"The general public doesn't even know how much they're paying in terms of the gas tax," he said.

And while the 2007 collapse of a Minneapolis interstate bridge remains a stark reminder of the potential consequences, it's unclear whether voters share a sense of crisis.

### Is infrastructure 'crumbling'?

As defined by Webster's, "infrastructure" refers to the "fundamental facilities and systems serving a country, city or area, [such] as transportation and communications systems, power plants and schools."

Key members of Congress regularly describe those systems as "crumbling." In its latest quadrennial report card released last year, the American Society of Civil Engineers awarded the United States' overall physical plant a grade of "D+," up from "D" four years earlier. By 2020, the group said, U.S. infrastructure needed some \$3.6 trillion worth of improvements, an amount almost equal to this year's entire federal budget.

On the report card, the nation's roads received a "D," compared to "D-" in 2009. Despite a near-term improvement in conditions and increased spending by all level of governments to \$91 billion annually, the report card said, another \$79 billion in capital investment is needed each year "to significantly improve conditions and performance." The report card cited a Federal Highway Administration estimate.

But the latest available agency statistics paint a brighter picture. From 2011 through last year, the percentage of travel on interstates and other major roads that met "good ride quality" standards rose from about 54 percent to 58 percent and is supposed to increase to almost 61 percent by next year, according to data in DOT's fiscal 2015 budget request. Similarly, the proportion of road surface on structurally deficient bridges fell from about 8 percent to 7 percent during the same time, a trend that the department also expects to continue.

"The infrastructure is not crumbling; in fact, it's getting better," said Chris Edwards, an economist at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank that favors cutting transportation spending to match available revenue.

"The discussion has been dominated by this engineering mindset that we have to pour more concrete," Edwards said.

What's needed instead, he said, is a balanced discussion that looks, for example, at whether highway congestion could be eased through electronic tolling rather than by building new lanes.

Also in the debate is the Obama administration, which in April proposed a \$302 billion, four-year package to dramatically increase spending on roads, rail and transit with new revenue coming from changes to the business tax code. The measure is now languishing on Capitol Hill.

In a National Press Club speech this week, Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx recited familiar talking points about failing infrastructure but argued that there are grounds for optimism. Republican governors are among those pushing for passage of a long-term spending bill, Foxx said, joined by prominent business organizations such as the National Association of Manufacturers. Ultimately, the outcome rests with the public, he acknowledged.

"We're going to convene leaders in all 50 states and make the case for ending the gridlock on this issue," Foxx said. "Right now, Washington is dictating outcomes to the American people. But democracy works the other way around. So we'll take this case to the American people and let them decide if the future is worth fighting for."