

Crumbling Infrastructure?

Is it true that our highways are ever more potholed and our bridges more unsafe?

By: Chris Edwards – March 20, 2013

Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood recently said that “America is one big pothole.” President Obama, members of Congress, and pundits often claim that our infrastructure is “crumbling.” The Senate Budget Committee’s new spending plan, for example, uses that word no fewer than ten times in calling for a \$100 billion infrastructure package. And in a report released yesterday, the American Society of Civil Engineers gives the nation a grade of D+ on its infrastructure.

But is America’s infrastructure really crumbling? For highways and bridges, the government’s own data show that the answer is generally no.

Let’s look at the data on bridges. The Federal Highway Administration reports that there were 5,345 “structurally deficient” bridges in the National Highway System in 2011. That was just 4.6 percent of all 116,929 NHS bridges. And here’s the surprising fact: That percentage has been falling steadily from the 8.7 percent reported by the FHWA in 1992.

In his State of the Union address this year, Obama implied that our infrastructure was “deteriorating,” and he pointed to “nearly 70,000 structurally deficient bridges.” The president was talking about not only NHS bridges — which the federal government is partly responsible for funding — but all bridges in the country, which totaled 605,086 in 2011.

So the full story is that there were 67,526 structurally deficient bridges in 2011, representing 11.2 percent of the total, and that this was down dramatically from their 20.7 percent share in 1992. The ASCE report complains that “one in nine” bridges is structurally deficient, but ignores the fact that the ratio has fallen from one in five.

Another group of problematic bridges are “functionally obsolete.” The share of bridges in this group has also fallen in the last two decades, according to the FHWA. And note that neither “functionally obsolete” nor “structurally deficient” bridges are necessarily unsafe; instead, they may just have older design standards and need more maintenance.

Data on the nation’s highways reveal similar trends. Rather than becoming more potholed, as LaHood claimed, our highways are getting smoother. Since 1989 the FHWA has reported the International Roughness Index for U.S. highways; the index ranges from 0 for the smoothest highways to 300 for the roughest. Here are the calculations of average IRI scores for different types of highways in 1989 and 2009: urban interstates, 115 and 92; other urban freeways, 124 and 101; rural interstates, 101 and 77; and other rural arteries, 104 and 87. For each type of highway, the scores show that surface qualities have improved substantially over time.

The IRI data were examined in a 2009 study by Jeffrey Campbell and Thomas Hubbard for the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. They found that “since the mid-1990s, our nation’s interstate highways have become indisputably smoother and less deteriorated.” And they concluded that the interstate system is “in good shape relative to its past condition.” However, that’s not how the ASCE sees it: The lobbying group ignores the IRI data and gives America’s roads an even lower grade — a D — than the D+ it gives our infrastructure as a whole.

To sum up, official data for bridges and highways undermine the notion that our infrastructure is “crumbling.” Indeed, our highways and bridges have been steadily improving in quality for at least two decades. It is true that America’s roads and highways are getting more congested, and we need to find ways to finance new capacity. But policymakers should cast a more critical eye on the claims made by advocates for higher infrastructure spending.

Consider another recent claim by LaHood in a National Public Radio interview: “At one time . . . we were the leader in infrastructure . . . But we’re falling way behind other countries, because we have not made the investments.” That is misleading. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports on government infrastructure spending for its members, which are all among the higher-income countries in the world. It turns out that government infrastructure spending in the United States is slightly higher than the average for OECD countries, when measured as a share of gross domestic product. In 2010 the United States spent 3.5 percent of GDP on infrastructure, while the OECD average was 3.3 percent. U.S. spending has been similar to the OECD average since at least 1980.

In short, there is no widespread crisis of crumbling infrastructure, but we do face challenges in reducing congestion on highways and other facilities. Yet the way forward cannot be to jack up federal spending, since the federal government is essentially broke. Instead, we should encourage greater innovation at the state level to get more bang for our infrastructure buck. Privatization and new electronic tolling systems on highways and bridges, for example, can help the states finance new investment. In turn, that would leave more of the existing transportation funds to patch the potholes and fix the bridges that do need repairs.