

NEW HAMPSHIRE UNION LEADER

NH isn't taking care of the boring roads and bridges

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Another year has quickly passed us by, and the holidays are upon us. It is that festive time of the year when a young man's fancy turns to asphalt and girders for, once again, it's Infrastructure Week. I hope you haven't waited until the last minute to fill in a pothole for that special someone in your life. But what better time to take a look at the state's infrastructure and see if, in fact, (New) London bridge is falling down.

The state's roads and bridges are probably not as bad as you think but are getting progressively worse, and we're falling behind the rest of the country. It is mostly, but not entirely, our fault as the system is rigged for favoritism.

I mentioned a few weeks ago that transportation policy at the federal level is particularly rife with favoritism as money gets filtered through a corrupt federal system. The corruption is not old-fashioned graft but institutionalized favoritism. Randall O'Toole, writing for the Cato Institute, researched the numbers and found "each Democratic congressman that a state had (on the Transportation Committee) received predicted bonus of \$163 million in federal transit funding in 2013." Apparently Republican congressmen couldn't expect as much of a pork-bonus. Not for lack of trying, of course, but because their non-committee colleagues were less sympathetic to their pleas.

Put another way, your state gets less if you don't have a congressman on the Transportation Committee.

How we are doing with the money depends on where you sit. In the spring, the roads always seem terrible, and we notice nearby bridges in need of repair. Some people want bells and whistles, a widening here, overhead tolling there. But the meat and potatoes of our transportation needs falls to the much less interesting, and even boring, matters of bridge repair and pavement.

Once a road is built, it needs regular maintenance to keep the pavement in usable condition. This is particularly true in a state with more road-buckling freeze-thaw cycles than anywhere in the country. Pavement lasts longer in Florida where they've never heard of a frost heave.

We also know when we build a bridge that it requires maintenance and will have to be replaced or rebuilt eventually. Because the average life cycle of a bridge is about 70 years, as opposed to paving which is closer to 10, there are political incentives to push off the costs to future lawmakers.

Each year, the federal highway administration publishes statistical data on the health of bridges and highways. Comparing New Hampshire's health to other states shows we are falling behind the country.

Bridges most in need of repair are categorized as structurally deficient, colloquially the important part of the "red list" of repair priorities. Each year, some of the bridges are fixed and taken off the list while others are added. In New Hampshire, the net total of bad bridges declined by 25 percent from 1995 to 2005 (from 447 to 334.) That's the same rate of decrease as the country as a whole — not bad at all.

But then we started to fall behind. In the next 10 years, from 2005 to 2015, the rest of the country saw another decline of 25 percent but New Hampshire's worst bridges fell by just 6.6 percent, 334 to 312 — adequate at best.

Paving is much more important, less costly, and we're doing a worse job. The miles of roads with a roughness index greater than 171 (essentially a measurement of bounciness) were just 17 percent in New Hampshire in 2001, much better than the national average of 25.6 percent. Over the next 12 years, our bad roads nearly doubled from 17 percent to a pathetic 33 percent. By comparison, the national average just nudged upwards from 25.6 percent to 28.4 percent.

We deteriorated 16 percentage points while the country lost just three points. No wonder the roads seem bumpy this spring.

Paving is not remotely exciting. No one ever named road resurfacing after a retiring politician. That makes it easy to ignore. New bridges are exciting. Fixing regular ones isn't. Without political enticements it falls upon us to insist lawmakers prioritize boring things.

Politicians get excited about new projects where they can put their names on a plaque. But we elect people to do the boring things. And because they are boring, they seem to fall through the cracks when no one is looking.