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A bridge collapse doesn't spell doom

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A bridge collapse in Washington state has alarmists warning yet again about our “decaying infrastructure,” our failing bridges and unsafe highways. The remedy, of course, is more tax money.

But here's the thing — the bridge didn't fall down because of any funding issues. A big ol' truck, that wasn't supposed to even use it, rammed into its support. The collapse wasn't evidence we need to spend more on infrastructure. It was evidence that truck drivers ought to look where they're going.

No one died in the accident on the Interstate 5 bridge spanning the Skagit River.

But of course, that didn't stop government officials from trying not to waste a crisis.

“The collapse of an Interstate highway bridge in northern Washington state is a wake-up call for the entire nation, the chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board says,” according to The Associated Press.

NTSB chair Debbie Hersman said, “This is a really significant event and we need to learn from it, not just in Washington but around the country.”

Sure we do. But what lessons should we draw from it?

Alarmists such as CBS News reporters claim “Thousands of bridges around the U.S. may be one freak accident or mistake away from collapse, even if the spans are deemed structurally sound. ... The crossings are kept standing by engineering design, not supported with brute strength or redundant protections like their more modern counterparts. Bridge regulators call the more risky spans ‘fracture critical,’ meaning that if a single, vital component of the bridge is compromised, it can crumple.”

But as the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials points out, “This does not mean the bridge is inherently unsafe, only that there is a lack of redundancy in its design.”

In other words, newer bridges are designed with fail-safes, older ones weren't.

And we're already fixing those.

“What the stories rarely mention is that in the last two decades the number of structurally deficient bridges has declined by 44 percent, from more than 118,000 in 1992 to fewer than 67,000 in 2012, even as the total number of highway bridges increased from 572,000 to 607,000,” the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole explains. “The number of fracture-critical bridges has declined from 22,000 in the last four years alone.

In other words, the problem is going away without the help of a giant new federal program.”

In fact, even the funding mechanism in place for fixing highways and bridges is the right kind.

“Highway user fees, including federal and state gas taxes and tolls, fund nearly all construction and maintenance of state highways and bridges,” O’Toole says.

“The Skagit River Bridge notwithstanding, these roads and bridges tend to be in better shape than those that are locally owned, which need about \$30 billion a year from property, sales, or other local taxes. User fees work better than taxes because the fees give highway managers signals about where to spend the money.”

The collapse of the Skagit River bridge was unfortunate, but it’s not a “wake-up call” by any means.

So tell the alarmists to calm down.