

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Can Congress fix I-80? How Biden's expected infrastructure plan could impact Sacramento

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The county's worst rated, heavily traveled bridges in 2018 were on I-80. An eastbound bridge over Steelhead Creek and a rail line, seen in drone video Feb. 7, 2020, was among them. Caltrans said the designation doesn't mean they are unsafe to use. BY **XAVIER MASCAREÑAS**

Can Joe Biden and Congress actually make the ride less bumpy on Interstate 80 as you pass through Sacramento?

Could be. Biden Wednesday is expected to unveil a massive infrastructure plan that aims to help repair America's roads and bridges.

California needs the help. About 6% of the state's 25,763 bridges, or 1,536, are considered "structurally deficient," according to the nonpartisan American Road and Transportation Builders Association. That's down from 2019's 1,797.

While that doesn't mean those structures are in danger of imminent collapse, it does mean repairs are needed.

Saying a bridge is deficient "doesn't mean the bridge is about to fall down. That kind of thing is very rare. Things that engineers do make sure the bridges are safe," said Paul Lewis, vice president for policy at the Eno Center for Transportation, a research group..

The designation means a bridge cannot handle or has exceeded its design life or capacity. The danger is that it could be shut down if an inspector does find more serious problems.

"A state or local government may close a bridge if there are immediate concerns, but people need to be aware there are issues and additional resources are needed," said Alison Black, the organization's chief economist.

California has been aggressively trying to repair highway damage. In addition to receiving federal money for repairs and replacement, the state transportation department funds road work through the state general fund and new taxes and fees adopted in the 2017 Road Repair and Accountability Act.

The state transportation department explained to The Bee that California has one of the congested transportation systems in the nation, including the two busiest ports for freight movement in the United States.

“The sheer number of vehicles and trucks using our roads and bridges causes deterioration over time. Bridge decks are specifically susceptible to wear and tear from traffic and account for more than 80% of bridges classified as poor in California,” the department said.

Bridges in California are inspected once every two years by qualified bridge inspectors. Any inspection findings that require critical maintenance are immediately addressed or the bridge is restricted or closed to traffic until necessary work is completed.

Bridges are repaired or replaced throughout California by the state, city, and county owners. Typically, between 300-500 bridges would likely be repaired or replaced in California are replaced. The projects are funded by federal, state and local sources.

Critics say the potential bridge danger is overblown. Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies and a fiscal policy expert at the libertarian Cato Institute, said data often showed improvements over time, including in the Sacramento area..

“Understandably, civil engineers want every asset to be 100% new and perfect,” he said. But “every household or private business has assets, each of which has some level of optimal wear and tear before it is scraped and replaced. It would be economically and environmentally unsound to replace every asset with a new one every year.”

SACRAMENTO BRIDGES

The state’s nine most traveled structurally deficient bridges are all in the Los Angeles area.

In the 6th congressional district, which is largely Sacramento, the road builders inventory listed 31 structurally deficient bridges last year, down from 43 in 2019 and 44 in 2018. It estimated \$124.9 million in repairs are needed.

In the 7th congressional district, which includes the Sacramento suburbs of Elk Grove and Folsom, there were 19 structurally deficient bridges last year, down from 23 in 2019. An estimated \$87.7 million was needed for repair. The list of most traveled bridges in need included the Interstate 80, Antelope Road and Pocket Road bridges.

Other bridges in the top 7th district bridges needing help were those at Bradshaw Road over Morrison Creek and Center Parkway over Union House Creek.

WILL CONGRESS AGREE?

Just how much of this money would wind up in the Sacramento area is unclear.

Last year, the state Transportation Commission committed \$22 billion over multiple years for over 1,200 projects in five programs funded in large part from the state’s 2017 law.

The projects are expected to help the state reach its goal of having 98% of its highway pavement in good or fair condition and to fix 500 additional bridges by 2027.

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Commission Chair Hilary Norton said she was “excited” about the Biden initiative, saying “This will help California continue to fix its roads and bridges, protecting them and making them safer and more multi-modal.”

Significant hurdles remain before Biden can get his infrastructure plan to become law. He is expected to propose higher taxes on corporations and the wealthy to help for it, which Republicans are warning won't go far.

“I don't think there's going to be any enthusiasm on our side for a tax increase,” Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, told a news conference last week.

Biden and Democrats, though, are determined to move fast. House Transportation Committee Peter DeFazio, D-Oregon, told reporters he hopes to have legislation pass the House this spring.

And in the Senate, there's talk that Democrats could use a parliamentary maneuver that would allow the plan to pass with 51 votes. Fifty senators caucus with the Democrats, meaning if they all stuck together, Vice President Kamala Harris would break the tie.