

NJ Transportation Chief: Route 3 Cracks Widened Over Months

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SECAUCUS, N.J. (CBSNewYork/AP) — A section of a New Jersey bridge was closed because of fears that widening cracks could lead to its collapse, the state's transportation commissioner said Thursday.

The right-hand lane of the Route 3 bridge eastbound over the Hackensack River [was closed Wednesday because of cracks in its support structure](#). The lane will remain closed until repairs are complete in about a month.

Three lanes are open to traffic, but trucks will not be allowed to use the left lane.

About 75,000 drivers use the bridge every day en route to the Lincoln Tunnel.

In October, inspectors checking the bridge found two 3-inch cracks in its steel beams, WCBS 880's Levon Putney reported.

"The tests this week found the cracks had grown to 6 3/4 inches and 4 1/8 inches," Transportation Commissioner Jamie Fox said. "That is what scared us."

Fox said the bridge is fracture critical, meaning it was not built to handle cracks.

"If one critical member of the bridge fails, the bridge or a section of it could collapse," he said.

Fox also shut down two other bridges in the state after the collapse of a Cincinnati bridge Monday, CBS2's Christine Sloan reported. On Tuesday, he [called for immediate safety inspections on every bridge in the state](#).

Fox said the situation shows why the state needs to hurry to find a way to refill the state's [Transportation Trust Fund](#) to pay for repairs.

He said there isn't enough money in the fund to repair 600 structurally deficient bridges — 40 of them on a priority list.

He, however, said the bridges that were closed are not in danger of collapsing and insisted the shutdown orders are not political.

"I am not afraid, nor is the department afraid, to shut down a bridge if we find it's unsafe," Fox said.

One unpopular move to fund repairs would be to raise New Jersey's gas tax, the lowest in the nation.

Jim Kirkos of the Meadowlands Regional Chamber of Commerce said there is another option: new tolls.

Several years ago, a proposal to make Interstate 78 a toll road had drivers up in arms.

But **TRIP**, a national transportation research group, says deficient bridges and bad roads cost residents more than \$11 billion annually.

"For the average New Jersey motorist, that adds up to \$1,951 a year," said TRIP's Will Wilkinson.

That includes wasted gasoline, car repairs and tire wear and tear.

"Just hit a pothole, bent two front rims, cost me a thousand dollars," said Tim Skala, a North Brunswick resident.