

## More than 100 Baton Rouge area bridges structurally deficient, report says

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Advocate file photo



**Will Sentell**

One of five bridges in the Baton Rouge area is structurally deficient, according to a report released Wednesday by a national research group.

The designation means that the bridge suffers from significant deterioration of the deck, supports or other major components, a review by the

Washington, D.C. group TRIP says.

TRIP is a national non-profit transportation organization.

The report says 122 of 613 bridges in the area are structurally deficient, which means they may be posted for lower weights – forcing alternate routes – or even closed if conditions warrant.

One of those on the list is the U.S. Hwy. 190 bridge over the Mississippi River, known as the Huey P. Long Bridge or Old Mississippi River bridge. It opened in 1939 and handles more than 20,000 vehicles per day.

It was described as one of the most heavily traveled, structurally deficient bridge as well as among the 25 with the lowest average ratings.

Others with problems on the most heavily-traveled list include bridges on La. Hwy. 1 over the Port Allen Canal; Goodwood Boulevard over Jones Creek; La. Hwy. 73 over Bayou Manchac and U.S. Hwy. 61/Airline Highway over La. Hwy. 73 North.

Shawn Wilson, secretary for the state Department of Transportation and Development, said Wednesday the report is based on DOTD data. "This isn't anything new," Wilson said.

"It is only going to get worse," he added. "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I am a realist. I cannot hope and pray these bridges get better without any intervention."

Louisiana faces a roughly \$14 billion backlog of road and bridge needs. Bridges account for \$3.4 billion of the backlog.

The state has about 13,000 bridges, including around 8,000 owned by the state.

Each major component of a bridge is rated on a scale of zero to nine.

Those with scores of 4 or below indicate poor condition.

The structurally deficient bridges in the Baton Rouge area carry about 419,000 cars and trucks per day, the report says.

The same group issued separate reviews of state and locally-owned bridges for the New Orleans and Lafayette areas.

Those studies concluded that 12 percent of New Orleans area bridges – 88 – are structurally deficient and 9 percent of those in the Lafayette area – 38 – meet that designation.

Four of the top five structurally deficient bridges or overpasses by traffic volume in New Orleans are on Interstate 10, including the I-10 Highrise over the inner harbor, two over Veterans Memorial Highway and one over Loyola Avenue.

Those four handle between nearly 62,000 and 116,500 cars and trucks per day.

Similar studies have raised alarms in the past, in part because of the terms used to describe bridge conditions.

However, the state Department of Transportation and Development regularly announces bridge closings because of various problems. More than 150 bridges have been shut down in the past two years on two-lane and four-lane roads, both locally and state-owned structures.

Wilson on Wednesday announced the 22nd and 23rd bridge closings of 2018, both in northeast Louisiana.

The report was issued at the same time a House-Senate transportation committee was kicking off its final public hearing during the panel's annual "road show" of area transportation needs. It focused on Baton Rouge-area needs and, as in previous hearings, included calls for a new bridge over the Mississippi River in Baton Rouge to ease daily backups.

Wilson noted that the pricetag to repair bridges is about the same as it was last year when a bid by Gov. John Bel Edwards' administration to increase the state gasoline tax died in the Legislature.

Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP, said in a written statement that bridge conditions are a key component of Louisiana's transportation system.

"Without increased and reliable transportation funding, numerous projects to improve and preserve Louisiana's aging bridges will not move forward, hampering the state's ability to efficiently and safely move people and goods," Wilkins said.

TRIP researches and evaluates data on transportation issues.

It is sponsored by insurance companies, highway construction firms and labor unions.