

LA's aging infrastructure: Nearly 2,000 structurally deficient bridges, no money for repairs

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NEW ORLEANS (WVUE) - Louisiana's infrastructure is aging, and there are nearly 2,000 bridges in the state that are structurally deficient. Experts say the funding isn't there to repair them.

Kam Movassaghi is a member of the American Society of Civil Engineers and a former secretary of the Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development. He has concerns about the state's infrastructure.

"I'm not going to alarm you and say that these bridges are going to fail. I don't know, and I hope they never fail. But, they're getting older, and I hope we close those bridges before it gets to the point of becoming dangerous that the public cannot travel on it, and that's what the DOTD is doing - they're closing those bridges," Movassaghi said.

According to data from the [U.S. Department of Transportation](#), there are more than 1,800 structurally deficient bridges in Louisiana.

"We've looked at bridge conditions all across the state of Louisiana and found that in the New Orleans area, there are 88 bridges that are structurally deficient," said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly with The National Transportation Research Group, or TRIP.

TRIP said a bridge is deemed "structurally deficient" if there is significant deterioration on the bridge deck or with its other major components. In a [new report](#) released just last month, TRIP ranked the 25 most heavily traveled structurally deficient bridges in our area.

"It is certainly alarming that there is such a high number of structurally deficient bridges," said Kelly. "In the New Orleans area, 12 percent of bridges are structurally deficient. That's slightly lower than the statewide average in Louisiana where 14 percent of bridges across the state are structurally deficient. So, it's not necessarily a good thing to be

slightly below or better than the state average when those numbers are still so high."

Kelly said while the term structurally deficient sounds frightening, it doesn't mean it's unsafe to cross bridges with that designation. She said they're maintained and monitored on a regular basis, but in many cases, they do need significant repairs or even replacement. "These structurally deficient bridges often times may be posted for lower weights or they might be closed if their condition would warrant that. Now, that becomes especially important if these are bridges traveled by emergency response vehicles or school buses or any vehicles where taking a longer route to detour around a structurally deficient bridge might be detrimental. Also, it's obviously just a hassle for ordinary drivers," Kelly said.

We wanted to know exactly what is wrong with each structurally deficient bridge in Louisiana and what repairs are being made to fix those problems. But our public records request was denied. The state told FOX 8 that the information is protected due to security concerns.

"Typically, when we have those types of reports, they are protected in terms of the safety and security of the bridge. One, because of the risk mainly because of the folks who want to do harm to the traveling public. But two, we tell you very simply what the number is," said Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development Secretary Shawn Wilson.

Wilson said he's concerned by how many structurally deficient bridges there are in Louisiana, and it's something he takes very seriously. He said he has closed 24 bridges this year alone.

Reporter: "How do you determine if it's not safe for the public, and what happens if it is deemed unsafe?"

Wilson: "We have annual and semiannual inspections. And all bridges, not just state-owned bridges, but locally owned bridges as well. We have over 12,900-plus bridges here in the State of Louisiana, and if it is unsafe, it's a closed bridge."

But, he said those closures come with a big cost to taxpayers.

"At the end of the day we're spending anywhere from \$125 [million] to \$150 million a year on bridges, so every time a bridge closes, I have to spend money on emergency repairs as opposed to building the types of bridges that we need,"

Wilson said.

TRIP said many of the bridges are structurally deficient because there simply isn't enough funding available to make the needed repairs.

"Given the aging nature of the state's transportation system, we will continue to see increased deterioration and a higher number of structurally deficient bridges if the state isn't able to adequately invest in the transportation system," Kelly said.

"We have the fourth-largest bridge deck area in the country, and so to do the bridge work I have to spend more money than what my counterparts might have to spend, not to mention that they have increased their revenue and this state hasn't," said Wilson.

The expert we spoke with agreed Louisiana needs additional funding to replace the bridges he said have reached the end of their lives.

"We are one of the highest structurally deficient bridges in the country, and that is certainly some concern and we need to start addressing that. We absolutely need to start addressing that because this is something that, as these bridges get older and get to the end of their life, they require a lot more attention, and God forbid if that attention suddenly is not there, then you know disaster could occur," said Movassaghi.