



## Emergency repairs trump state's rural road spending

By Valerie Myers

41 percent of rural roads and bridges are rated poor/mediocre, but flood/slide-damaged infrastructure is priority.

Rural roads and bridges in Pennsylvania are among the worst in the nation, according to a new report.

Money that had been budgeted to improve some of those roads and bridges this year instead will be used to repair infrastructure damaged by flooding and landslides, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation.

It's not the first time that's happened. Money intended to improve rural roads last year also was diverted for emergency repairs.

And that may become a pattern, PennDOT spokeswoman Alexis Campbell said.

"We are hopeful that last year may be an anomaly, but we fear it may be the new norm," Campbell said in a statement Friday.

The department typically budgets \$30 million in any given fiscal year to fund emergency repairs, Campbell said. It so far has spent more than \$127.2 million on emergency repairs in the fiscal year ending June 30.

Money diverted from rural improvements helped cover that cost.

Emergency repairs still needed following the state's record rainfall in 2018 will divert money from rural roads again this year.

The state expects to spend about \$8.2 million on rural infrastructure this year through the Rural Commercial Routes program, Campbell said. That's far less than the

\$200 million in rural improvements anticipated earlier this year.

In 2018, even with historic flood damage, the state paved 864 miles of roads that carry 5,000 or fewer vehicles daily, Campbell said.

On the bright side, \$16 million budgeted annually for maintenance through the Road Maintenance and Preservation program will be used mainly on secondary roads, she said.

The dismal assessment of the state's rural infrastructure was released this week by T.R.I.P., a national transportation research group. The study ranked Pennsylvania's rural roads as the 12th worst in the nation.

Twenty-one percent of the state's rural roads are rated in poor condition. Another 20 percent are rated mediocre, according to the study.

The study also found that 18 percent of the state's rural bridges are rated poor or are structurally deficient. That's the fourth highest percentage in the country.

A sound transportation system including rural infrastructure is crucial to the continued economic viability and quality of life in the state, Doug Hill, executive director of the County Commissioners Association of Pennsylvania, said in a statement.

Without a solid and interconnected state, county and municipal road and bridge system, "we cannot get children to school, citizens to work or goods to market," Hill said.

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