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Hudson Bridges Falling Down?

New Report Details Local Deficiencies



By Lisa Reider

NEW YORK – Transport research non-profit TRIP recently issued what appears to be a dire report of the region's bridges, rating 329, or thirteen percent of Hudson Valley bridges, as poor or structurally deficient, and 64 percent as "fair." The report detailed bridges 20 feet or longer in Columbia, Dutchess, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, Ulster, and Westchester counties.

A bridge is rated poor or structurally deficient if there is significant deterioration of the bridge deck, supports or other major components, according to TRIP. The reported estimated that those bridges carry 2,552,156 vehicles per day.

The 64 percent (1,634 total bridges) that are rated fair are considered to have sound structural elements, but minor deterioration to the bridge's deck, substructure or superstructure.

"The condition of the Hudson Valley's bridges is unacceptable and addressing needed repairs is of critical importance to the safety of the region's residents and vitality of its businesses," said Hudson Valley Economic Development Corporation president and CEO Mike Oates. "If commercial vehicles need to use alternate routes to reach their destinations, important deliveries will be delayed, travel time and fuel costs will skyrocket and the local economy will suffer. It is the quality of our

infrastructure that helps makes the Hudson Valley a great place to do business. We cannot allow this infrastructure to fall into disrepair and expect our regional economy to grow." The report highlighted six bridges in Ulster County rated poor: one in Esopus on Route 213 over the Walkkill River, 1.2 miles south of Tillson; a Rosendale bridge on Route 25, 0.4 miles north of Route 87 over the Rondout Reservoir; the Hurley Avenue and Dock Street bridges in Kingston, one 1.5 miles from Woodstock on Saw Kill Road, and one in the Town of Ulster over Esopus Creek.

Professional engineer Ellen Sweet, who lives and works locally, noted that nothing in the TRIP report was particularly surprising, given that the results are on-par with the grade the state got in 2015, which rated twelve percent of the state's bridges as "structurally deficient."

"That's a phrase that invites some fear-mongering, though — structurally deficient. It's important to note that structurally deficient doesn't mean unsafe," said Sweet. "it just means that the bridge requires maintenance or doesn't meet modern standards." Sweet explained that the fact that the status of our area bridges is so well documented should actually be reassuring. Federal law requires bridges to be inspected every other year, and bridges rated four or lower (i.e. structural deficient/poor condition) are inspected annually. Sweet said a full inspection includes: the examination of previous inspection reports, photo documentation, and a report submitted to the bridge owner. "In short, the bridge owners are aware of the deficiencies. The problem is funding, and time."

The TRIP report said a lack of sufficient funding makes it difficult to adequately maintain and improve the state's bridges. Plus, inadequate funding for ongoing maintenance can lead to even higher expenses down the road. "The need to repair or replace high priority bridges tends to create a funding cycle that makes it difficult to keep pace with the needed preservation activities," the report noted.

Sweet agreed with that sentiment.

"Ideally the owner would conduct proactive maintenance on the bridge, stopping minor problems before they become major problems and extending the service life of the bridge.

Unfortunately, this is often not the case — it's too easy to cut maintenance to save money in the short term. And while the effects are noticeable at the time, years later it can create significant, and expensive, problems."

Many small towns may not have the funds to set aside to repair their bridges, and may have to rely on applying for federal funding, which can also be a time-consuming process, to get the financial support they need.

Sweet added, "It feels like a catch-22, spending money to save money. But that's what is necessary to make our existing bridges last and our new bridges last even longer. If that's the one thing this report can do — remind towns and villages that consistent routine maintenance is necessary for all infrastructure and should have funds allocated to it — that would be a significant step in improving our report card."

A copy of the report can be found via the following link.