

Progress on Pennsylvania bridges could falter without money, report says



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Motorists drive across the Fern Hollow Bridge on Dec. 22, 2022, the first day it reopened after the January 2022 collapse

The condition of Pennsylvania's bridges has improved in recent years, according to a new report, but that progress could be reversed without additional funding.

TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based national transportation research nonprofit, on Thursday [released a study](#) that commended the progress the commonwealth has made in repairing and maintaining its aging bridges. However, experts said that positive trend is bound to reverse without additional funding.

Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, said Pennsylvania's spans are "significantly better" now than they were a decade ago.

Bridges are inspected at least once every two years and rated by the condition of their deck, superstructure and substructure. Those components are ranked on a scale of zero through nine, with ratings of four or lower earning the bridge a poor condition rating. That can lead to weight restrictions and closures.

Pittsburgh-area bridges have [come under increased scrutiny](#) since the poorly-rated [Fern Hollow Bridge collapsed](#) into a ravine in the city's Frick Park in January 2022. Nobody died in the collapse, but motorists on the span suffered injuries.

In the Pittsburgh region, about 12% of local- and state-maintained spans — or a total of 510 bridges — are in poor condition, with about 1.2 million vehicles traveling across a poorly-rated bridge every day, according to Thursday's report.

In the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre region, 22% of bridges have a poor rating.

The Erie, Harrisburg and Lehigh Valley regions all tallied about 10% of their spans in poor condition, while about 14% of bridges in the Philadelphia area are in poor shape.

According to the TRIP report — which used PennDOT records and Federal Highway Administration data — about 13% of Pennsylvania's local- and state-maintained bridges are rated in poor condition. A decade ago, 25% of the commonwealth's

bridges had been ranked in that lowest category, making Pennsylvania's bridges the worst in the nation at that time.

Now, Pennsylvania has the sixth most bridges in poor condition nationwide. On average, about 7% of bridges are in poor condition per state.

The condition of bridges is "an issue of great importance to our region," said Dan DeBone, president and CEO of the Westmoreland Chamber of Commerce.

Manufacturing industries rely on bridges to transport goods and stabilize the local economy, and workers and residents rely on bridges to get where they need to go every day, he said.

When bridges deteriorate enough that they have weight restrictions or closures, fire trucks and ambulances have to take longer routes to reach emergency scenes, school buses have to reroute while getting kids to and from school, and commercial trucks cause added congestion in residential communities, said Tim Phelps, executive director of the Transportation Management Association of Chester County. Longer detours, he said, leads to more emissions and pollution.

"When a bridge closes," he said, "it impacts everyone."

Without additional investment, the TRIP report found, it seems likely there will be more problems with Pennsylvania's bridges that could lead to closures and weight restrictions.

The boost in the state of Pennsylvania's bridges in recent years was supported, in part, by additional funding from a 2021 federal bipartisan infrastructure bill that is providing \$13.1 billion in funds for highway and bridge investments across the commonwealth over five years, the TRIP report noted.

While extra funding has helped, more is needed to keep up with infrastructure expenses as construction costs skyrocket, the report said. Since the beginning of 2021, highway construction costs — including expenses related to labor and materials — have jumped by 69%.

According to Moretti, a 50% increase in funding for Pennsylvania bridges could help "hold the line in terms of overall bridge condition and halt the reversal of progress we've seen in the last decade."

Without that influx in cash, though, the report estimated that the percentage of Pennsylvania's bridges in poor condition could jump from 13% to 17% in just five years.

"The need for additional funding to offset inflation and rising material cost for bridge repair and replacement has never been greater," DeBone said during a virtual press conference Thursday. "Investing in our bridges is not only just about maintenance. It is about securing a future where our industries can thrive, our communities can grow, and our economies can remain robust and, most importantly, competitive."

This comes as many Pennsylvania bridges are reaching the end of their anticipated lifespans, according to the TRIP report. The intended lifespan for many bridges built in this era is about 50 years, TRIP reported, but the average age of Pennsylvania bridges is about 55.

In the Pittsburgh region, the average age of all bridges is about 53 years old. Bridges rated in poor condition in the region are, on average, 82 years old.