

Despite improvements, Pa. bridges in disrepair remain nearly double national average

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PITTSBURGH (TNS) —Despite a decade of statewide improvements to infrastructure, the percentage of Pennsylvania bridges in poor condition is still nearly double the national average, according to a recently released report.

Researchers at TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that 2,835 of the 22,043 of bridges across the state — about 13% — were in poor condition. The national average is 7%.

The numbers represent a significant improvement from 2013, when 25% of bridges statewide were in poor condition. At the time, that ranking made Pennsylvania the state with the highest share of bridges with significant deterioration.

The TRIP report, titled “Preserving Pennsylvania’s Bridges,” comes months after a Post-Gazette analysis found that Pittsburgh bridges in poor condition ferry about 136,000 motorists each day.

Records show the city repeatedly failed to respond to inspectors’ alerts about major repairs and safeguards that need to be implemented — an issue that culminated when the Fern Hollow Bridge collapsed to the ground in January 2022. Several motorists on the bridge and passengers on a Pittsburgh Regional Transit bus were injured when the span fell into a ravine in Frick Park. Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP, said the condition of a state’s infrastructure has wide-ranging implications.

“Bridges in poor condition have a significant impact on the functioning of a region’s economy,” Moretti said. “It can also — in situations where bridges are restricted to lighter weight vehicles or closed — impact the movement of emergency vehicles, commercial trucks, school busses and farm equipment.”

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

The bridges in poor condition in the Pittsburgh area that researchers found to be the most traveled include the South End Bridge over Chartiers Creek in Bridgeville, and a bridge at the intersection of state Route 22 and Raccoon Creek in Smith Township, Washington County. The Charles Anderson Bridge — the third highest trafficked span in the city of Pittsburgh that takes commuters to and from the University of Pittsburgh — is also one of the bridges designated as in need of repair.

The study also compared bridge conditions across Pennsylvania’s six largest urban areas. Pittsburgh landed in the middle of the pack, with about 12% in poor condition. About 10% of bridges were considered to have significant deterioration in Erie, Harrisburg and the Lehigh Valley.

The overview comes as many state bridges have neared or surpassed their anticipated lifespan of 50 years, according to the TRIP report.

The average age of Pittsburgh area bridges is 53 years, slightly under the state average of 55 years, although the average age of bridges in the region rated in poor condition is 82, researchers found.

While state infrastructure has improved over the years, it could fall into a backslide without funding, Moretti said. In November 2021 the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act was signed into law, providing \$13.1 billion for investments in highways and bridges across the state over five years. That funding has been impacted by the skyrocketing cost of construction, which has increased nearly 70% since 2021 due to inflation, according to the Federal Highway Administration’s National Highway Construction Cost Index.

The future success of the state hinges, in part, on adequate infrastructure, although it will come at a cost, TRIP researchers said.

“To retain businesses, accommodate population and economic growth and preserve economic competitiveness, Pennsylvania will need to maintain and modernize its bridges by repairing or replacing those in poor condition and providing needed maintenance on other bridges,” researchers wrote in the report. “Making needed improvements to Pennsylvania’s bridges will require increased and reliable funding from local, state and federal governments.”