

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Wisconsin's roads, bridges, broadband earn a C+ grade, and that's good? Well, yes and no.



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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Tuesday, September 17, 2024



Kenya Simms of Milwaukee watches the workers Tuesday at the Cherry Street bridge, which is under construction due to a joint project between Milwaukee and the state Department of Transportation. *Jovanny Hernandez / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

Aided by a wave of federal funding but hampered by age, policy restrictions and other challenges, Wisconsin's infrastructure earned a C-plus in the American Society of Civil Engineers' 2024 state infrastructure report card. State report cards are released by the group every four years, meaning the latest one accounts for both pandemic impacts and an injection of federal dollars for infrastructure needs. [In 2020, the state earned a C.](#)

The group assessed 17 types of infrastructure throughout Wisconsin, examining their capacity and conditions, how they're funded, operated and maintained, their impact on public safety, and the degree to which they're resilient and innovative. An A grade is defined as "exceptional," an F grade is "failing."

Ken Mika, co-chair of the committee that authored the report, said Wisconsin is one of just three states to receive a C-plus rating, currently the highest in the nation. That doesn't necessarily mean Wisconsin's infrastructure is at the top of the pack though, he said, because different states assess different numbers of infrastructure types.

Here's a look at how the infrastructure many residents use regularly performed.

Roads and bridges

Wisconsin received an improved score on road infrastructure, a C, [compared to its 2020 score of a D-plus](#). Mika viewed it as one of the state's biggest wins, but noted significant challenges still to be dealt with.



A worker cuts rebar Tuesday at the Cherry Street bridge, which is under construction due to a joint project between Milwaukee and the state Department of Transportation to rehabilitate the bridge. *Jovanny Hernandez / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*

The report card pulls statistics from the national transportation research group TRIP, which found that deficient roads cost Wisconsin drivers \$7.6 billion annually due to vehicle wear and tear, wasted gas because of congestion and the cost of crashes. The cost is highest in Milwaukee and Madison, the group found, with an estimated cost to drivers of more than \$2,400 and \$2,100 a year, respectively.

Funding for road repairs has been "increasingly strained" as inflation ticks up and Wisconsin's gas tax — the [largest revenue source](#) for the state transportation fund — has stayed the same, according to the report card.

To improve, Wisconsin could work on making non-state roads safer, invest in pedestrian and cycling infrastructure for alternative options, create multimodal transportation systems in urban areas to reduce congestion and make investments that offset the loss of gas tax funding from electric vehicles.

Wisconsin's 14,412 bridges received a C-plus. Because the average bridge in Wisconsin is at or near the end of its design life, the report card recommends taking a more urgent look at funding repairs — including, again, raising the gas tax.

"We're still paying for roadways and bridges with funding from almost 20 years ago," Mika said.

Broadband

Wisconsin is the first state in the nation to grade broadband on its infrastructure report card. That grade: C-minus.

It shows that although the state made significant investments — including at least \$1 billion from the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act — achieving universal broadband is still going to cost a lot of money, Mika said.

In an increasingly digitized world, fast and reliable internet speeds have become crucial for everything from telehealth appointments to completing school assignments at home.

According to the report card, about 5% of locations in Wisconsin are unserved and about 7% are underserved by broadband, a particular challenge in rural areas.

The report card estimates it will cost about \$2.2 billion to bring all unserved and underserved locations up to speed by 2030, the state's goal. Additional state funding for broadband "will be an essential element" to achieving that, the report card notes.

Transit and rail

Rail in Wisconsin also was graded for the first time in the 2024 report card, and earned one of the higher grades, a B.

Wisconsin's rail system has about 3,300 miles of track and transports about a third of the freight moving within the state. Most of the tracks are owned by private railroad companies. The report card gives a nod to Amtrak's Borealis train route, which opened earlier this year to connect Chicago and the Twin Cities through Wisconsin.



Traffic travels along on I-94 west of downtown near 35th Street in Milwaukee on Thursday, Nov. 4, 2021.

— Photo by Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel ORG XMIT: DBY 1 Mike De Sisti / Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

To improve, the report card suggests securing funding for projects that would address freight bottlenecks, analyze crossings that have more frequent accidents and work with communities that are "impacted by dramatic changes in train frequencies," among other recommendations.

Public transit, such as buses, received a D-plus. Ridership has been slow to return to pre-pandemic levels, according to the report card, and without increased state and federal support, that could result in "less frequent service, reduced hours of operation, less accessibility to jobs, and, in some cases, elimination of service completely in areas of low ridership."

Drinking water

The state's drinking water infrastructure earned a C.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has estimated that Wisconsin will need nearly \$11.8 billion through 2040 to address infrastructure problems that affect drinking water. One of the state's main problems is lead in drinking water due to lead service lines, an issue proving costly to address. The report card also notes the presence of the "forever chemicals" known as PFAS in some private wells.

The report card recommends that water utilities replace water mains more proactively and that state officials aim to increase both state and federal funding to replace lead service lines. It also recommends expanding and strengthening the Safe Drinking Water Loan Program, which provides low-interest loans and grants to water utilities looking to make repairs and upgrades.

Public parks

Wisconsin's public parks, including state and local park systems, got a D in the report card. The low grade was largely attributed to lack of funding and aging facilities in need of significant repairs.

The report card highlights Milwaukee County parks in particular, citing a [2018 Wisconsin Policy Forum report](#) that found that 85% of parking lots, 75% of paved walkways and 54% of Oak Leaf Trail segments had pressing infrastructure needs in the next decade.



The American Society of Civil Engineers' 2024 state infrastructure report card noted Wisconsin's funding model for state parks, which are paid for almost entirely by user fees, licenses and concessions. Wisconsin's spending on state parks is among the lowest, if not the lowest, in the country.

Mark Hoffman/Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

It also notes Wisconsin's funding model for state parks, which are paid for almost entirely by user fees, licenses and concessions.

[According to a 2023 report from the Wisconsin Policy Forum](#), Wisconsin's spending on state parks was the lowest in the country in 2017.

To give parks a boost, the report card recommends that the state return to funding state parks with general fund revenue (a funding source that was eliminated in the 2015-17 biennial budget), increase park user fees and hunting and fishing license fees, and provide tax credits for conservation donations. For Milwaukee County parks, the report card suggests creating more partnerships with nonprofit groups and corporate sponsors, as well as with municipalities, to help shoulder their operation and maintenance burdens.

Madeline Heim is a [Report for America](#) corps reporter who writes about environmental issues in the Mississippi River watershed and across Wisconsin. Contact her at 920-996-7266 or mheim@gannett.com.