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Engineers Give America's Infrastructure D+, Again

But it's not all bad news. The American Society of Civil Engineers reports that some types of infrastructure have improved.

BY DANIEL C. VOCK | MARCH 9, 2017

Transit systems earned the lowest mark in the report card. (David Kidd)
Infrastructure in the United States is in such poor condition that it would only merit a “D+” if it were graded like students, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE). The group estimates it would take an additional $2 trillion of spending by 2025 to bring the average up to a “B.”

The low marks, which remain unchanged from 2013 when the group last evaluated the country’s infrastructure, come as President Trump has pledged to spur $1 trillion of investment in infrastructure but has yet to formalize a plan for doing so.

But it’s not all bad news: Some types of infrastructure have somewhat improved. Rail, for example, went from a “C+” to a “B,” the highest grade for any type of infrastructure. That largely reflects the health of private freight railroads, which spent $27.1 billion to improve their infrastructure in 2015 alone, according to ASCE.

Other areas that showed progress in the report were hazardous waste, inland waterways, levees, ports, schools and wastewater.

Meanwhile, transit systems earned the lowest mark in the report card, falling to a “D−” from its previous “D” grade. “Despite increasing demand, the nation’s transit systems have been chronically underfunded, resulting in aging infrastructure and a $90 billion rehabilitation backlog,” the group noted. Several systems -- particularly those in New York, Washington, D.C., and San Francisco -- are struggling with increased rider demand, long-neglected infrastructure and uncertain funding.
Solid waste infrastructure, along with parks and other recreational facilities, also got worse.

On solid waste, concerns centered on the inefficiency of trash systems. The current infrastructure does not discourage people from generating more garbage, and efforts to increase recycling have stalled.

"In many parts of the country," the group wrote, "recycling and composting are not occurring due to a lack of market need for recyclable materials, many Americans' lack of desire to sort and separate waste, and the cost associated with sorting out recyclables at collection facilities."

For public parks, ASCE cited a growing backlog of needed repairs at both the state and federal levels. The group says the current bill for deferred maintenance at state parks is $95.3 billion. That's on top of another $11.9 billion in unmet needs for the National Park Service. More than half of the budget for the U.S. Forest Service, meanwhile, is now dedicated to fighting forest fires.

The engineers' easy-to-digest report card is one of the most frequently cited reports on the condition of infrastructure in the country. Since 1998, the overall assessment in the Infrastructure Report Card has always been either a "D" or "D+".

With the release of this year's report, ASCE advocated several steps for increasing infrastructure spending, including:

• Raising the federal per-gallon fuel taxes on gasoline and diesel, which have remained at the same level since 1993;

• Increasing tolls and other fees for infrastructure that "reflect the true cost of using, maintaining and improving [it]";

• Preventing public officials from using money generated by fuel taxes and other infrastructure-related fees for noninfrastructure purposes; and

• Identifying projects that would be good candidates for public-private partnerships.

"We need our elected leaders -- those who pledged to rebuild our infrastructure while on the campaign trail -- to follow through on those promises with investment and innovative solutions that will ensure our infrastructure is built for the future," said ASCE President Norma Jean Mattei in a statement.

Bud Wright, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and
Transportation Officials, echoed that sentiment.

“It's our hope that this report card will help turn that talk into action, prompting lawmakers to pass new legislation to provide long-term sustainable funding for America's highway and transit programs," he says.

President Trump promised on the campaign trail to increase infrastructure spending by as much as $1 trillion. One proposal issued by his campaign suggested using tax credits to spur that type of investment from the private sector. But the plan would apply only to projects that could generate revenue on their own and does not address the less lucrative projects needed in rural areas or the costs of replacing worn-out infrastructure, like crumbling highways or leaky pipes for drinking water.

Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao has called for greater use of public-private partnerships but also has acknowledged that more federal funding is needed.

The president continues to push for an infrastructure plan publicly, but the issue appears to be on the backburner in the Republican-led Congress.
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