

A SAFER ROAD TO TOMORROW

October 2007 Newsletter

Old Age and Low Funding Stalk State's Infrastructure

The deadly collapse of the I-35W Bridge in Minneapolis has been a grim reminder for all of us about the importance of bridge and highway maintenance. Though most likely an isolated event, the Minnesota tragedy brings into sharp focus the dangers associated with our aging road infrastructure. And while this collapse occurred in the Midwest, it might just as easily have happened here in the Northeast, or on the West Coast, or somewhere down south. More sobering still, this tragedy may be just the tip of the iceberg, with similar hazards lurking just below the surface.

In 2006, New Hampshire and the rest of the country celebrated the 50th anniversary of the Interstate Highway System's launch. Its completion, years later, stands as one of history's greatest engineering accomplish-

ments. However, the sheer magnitude of this national network means that there are thousands of bridges (approximately 55,000) and roughly 47,000 miles of highway out there that are approaching the half-century mark. Plus, New Hampshire, like all states, also has a huge inventory of local, non-Interstate bridges, many of them much older than 50 years. Like all man-made structures, bridges and pavement have a predictable lifespan and they require maintenance throughout their service life, especially here in the Northeast, where the winters are wet, freezing, and salty—conditions that are hostile to concrete, steel, and asphalt.

New Hampshire inspects its bridges on a periodic basis, and it classifies

each structure according to its condition. If the bridge needs work, it is given a slot in the Ten-Year Highway Plan, its relative position on the list depending on the severity of any problem(s). Theoretically, the repair work will be accomplished within ten years, assuming that the ten-year plan is adequately funded. But the plan is seriously under-funded. In fact, New Hampshire Department of Transportation Commissioner Charles O'Leary has stated that the ten-year plan is actually a 35-year plan, based on projects already booked. Meanwhile, each new year ushers in a new crop of projects, as additional highways and bridges show their age. Clearly, New Hampshire's highway program is woefully under-funded.



A SAFER ROAD
TO TOMORROW

Safety · Quality of Life · Economic Development

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Safer Road Partners

Associated General Contractors of New Hampshire

The Associated General Contractors is a non-profit trade organization of general contractors, subcontractors, and industry professionals dedicated to improving the professional standards of the construction industry.

Business & Industry Association

The Association is New Hampshire's leading business trade association. It advocates for business interests with state and federal legislators and regulators.

Safety and Health Council of Northern New England

The Council's mission is to educate and promote safety & health policies, practices and procedures that prevent and mitigate human economic losses arising from unintended causes.

New Hampshire Association of Chiefs of Police

The Association secures a closer official and personal relationship among commanding officers of all New Hampshire, to encourage a cordial and cooperative relationship among all police officials.

New Hampshire Lodging and Restaurant Association

The Association is a statewide, non-partisan trade organization. Our mission is to promote, protect and educate the food service and lodging industries of the state and to ensure positive business growth for our members.

Top 10 Deadliest Days of the Year To Drive

Based on 25 years of research statistics

1. July 4
2. July 3
3. December 23
4. December 24
5. December 22
6. August 3
7. January 1
8. September 1
9. September 2
10. August 4



Source: *National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Highway Crash Fatality* and www.insurance.com.

NH's Bridges Ranked Worse than Minnesotas

Field data shows room for improvement in New Hampshire's infrastructure, specifically bridges. According to information published in *Better Roads Magazine's* annual "Bridge Inventory," New Hampshire's percentage of "structurally deficient or functionally obsolete (SD/FO) interstate and state-maintained bridges in 2006 was 21 percent; this compares with 10 percent for Minnesota—where the deadly I-35W collapse occurred--and 21.9 percent overall nationally. Also, of New Hampshire's municipally maintained bridges, 45 percent were listed as SD/FO, Minnesota's percentage was 15 percent, and the national average was 27 percent. Nearly half of state-maintained roads and almost a third of bridges in New Hampshire are in substandard condition, earning the state a "below-average" grade in a report released last year by [The Road Information Program \(TRIP\)](#), a national, nonprofit transportation research group. The TRIP report evaluates and assigns grades to traffic congestion and road safety in New Hampshire.

The TRIP report, titled "Making the Grade in New Hampshire: An Analysis of the Ability of New Hampshire's Transportation System to Meet the State's Need for Safe and Efficient Mobility," finds that

47 percent of state-maintained roads in New Hampshire are rated in poor or mediocre condition, earning the state a grade of "D" for its road conditions. The report also assigns a grade of "D" to bridge conditions in New Hampshire, noting that 32 percent of bridges in the state are rated as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. The state received a grade of "C" for traffic safety, with an average of 139 traffic fatalities occurring annually. Congestion levels in New Hampshire also earn the state a grade of "C," with 24 percent of the state's urban Interstates and other highways or freeways considered congested. According to the TRIP report, 14 percent of bridges in NH are rated as structurally deficient, showing significant deterioration to decks and other major components. An additional 18 percent of the state's bridges are functionally obsolete. These bridges do not meet modern design standards or are no longer adequate for the volume of traffic that they carry.

"Without an increase in transportation investment, NH will not be able to move forward with numerous projects that would improve road and bridge conditions, enhance safety, relieve congestion and attract economic development," said William M. Wilkins, TRIP's executive director.

Additional findings of the TRIP report include:

- Vehicle travel on New Hampshire's major

highways increased by 34 percent from 1990 to 2004 – rising from 9.8 billion vehicle miles traveled in 1990 to 13.2 billion vehicle miles traveled in 2004.

- The traffic fatality rate on New Hampshire's rural, non-Interstate roads is more than twice as high as the fatality rate on all other roads in the state. The fatality rate on New Hampshire's rural, non-Interstate roads was 1.77 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel, while the fatality rate on all other roads in the state was 0.85 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles of travel.
- While only 45 percent of travel takes place on New Hampshire's rural, non-Interstate roads, 61 percent of fatalities occur on these roads.
- With an increase in transportation funding, New Hampshire would be able to move forward with numerous transportation projects that would help relieve traffic congestion and improve traffic safety. These projects are crucial to the state's ability to provide more efficient traffic flow for motorists and commercial truckers, which would help improve economic productivity and boost economic growth.

DOT Commissioner O'Leary Warns of Imminent, Large Deficit If State Doesn't Fix Highway Fund



Underscoring the precarious financial situation of the NHDOT, Commissioner Charles O'Leary stated at a recent work

session on House Bill 103 that if no remedy is found, approximately 25 percent of the DOT's staff would have to be cut, which equates to roughly 575 individuals, mostly engineers. He explained that without sufficient funds, there would be no construction projects, thus there would be no need for people to become involved with projects.

The session was part of an ongoing effort authorized earlier this year by House Bill 103, which created a study commission to research and recommend ways to reconcile the shortfall in revenue actually available from the Highway Fund with the actual costs of projects contained in the state's Ten-Year Highway Plan. Already, approximately 200 positions have been cut within the DOT over the past six years, and it is becoming increasingly obvious that the department is in serious financial trouble, observers say.

Commissioner O'Leary projected that if the current fiscal situation continues without change, the Highway Fund would have a zero balance

by mid 2009, and that there would be a deficit of roughly \$730 million by the year 2018. The commissioner provided a chart (see accompanying graphic on back page) that detailed the continuing downward slide he predicted.

"There's no question that we have a broke DOT," commented Rep. David Campbell.

Rep. John Graham observed that block grants to municipalities are diminishing and that this was going to negatively impact local property taxes throughout the state.

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Study Commission Tackles the Ten-Year Plan Crisis

One of the most significant developments in state transportation this year is the study commission—approved by the legislature and signed into law by the governor—that has been appointed to study the state highway trust fund. Established by House Bill 103 earlier this year, the commission's duties include: Reviewing both the Ten-Year Highway Plan and the revenues to support the plan; making recommendations as to how the state will maintain its highway infrastructure as outlined in the ten-year plan; and reviewing/recommending alternatives for future highway funding and changes to the ten-year plan to make the plan fiscally sound and viable. The commission, which includes three members of the Senate, three members of the House, and one member appointed by the governor, is instructed by HB 103 to report its findings on or before November 1, 2007.

At the organizational meeting of the commission, DOT Commissioner Charles O'Leary was invited to address the members. The centerpiece of the commissioner's presentation was a three-page letter in which he outlined 13 "possible ideas for addressing funding." These included (in brief form):

1. Reduce capital spending by limiting the number of projects and the scope of work for individual projects
2. Reduce operational spending
3. Limit the use of state and federal highway funds to non-turnpike highways
4. Raise or index the gas tax
5. Place a sales tax on gasoline and diesel fuel and dedicate the revenue to a transportation fund
6. Raise the gas tax and specify additional funding to specific, high-priority projects
7. Create a fund for emergencies, such as floods
8. Bond projects through the use of General Funds
9. Utilize public/private partnerships whereby private companies construct projects and toll the facilities to cover costs
10. Sell or long-term lease the NH Turnpike System to a private company and utilize the proceeds to fund non-turnpike projects (similar arrangements have been made in the Midwest)
11. Raise turnpike toll rates, either selectively or across the board
12. Reduce or eliminate the toll discount for E-Z Pass users
13. Complete the toll plaza at the previously proposed location in Nashua, and relocate the Dover Toll Plaza in Newington along the Spaulding Turnpike.

Commissioner O'Leary suggested that a good "starting point" for managing the ten-year plan would be to eliminate outright a number of projects that were not of high priority. These cuts would allow the ten-year plan's overall price tag to be lowered by roughly \$1.1 billion, and would allow the plan to be carried out in a 22-year time-frame—as opposed to the current estimate of 35 years, but still well over twice as long as the ten-year plan time-frame. He also noted that many local and state officials assume that once a proposed project was added to the ten-year plan it was automatically funded, but that this was an incorrect conclusion. Further, the 22-year time frame was based on the assumption that no new projects would be added to the existing backlog. In this regard, he posed the rhetorical question, "What if nothing (new) is done?" The commissioner also observed that it could be assumed that no significant federal funds will be forthcoming for the I-93 project.

Commissioner O'Leary stated that the turnpike system had reached its limit in bonding, and that no new bonds could be issued for projects on the turnpike system until the current ones were paid down. Also, it was assumed that inflation would average 3 percent per year during the next 22 years, but this could only be estimated and that for the past three years, inflation for the construction industry had risen roughly 15 percent per year. The commissioner, who served previously in this position from 1990 to 1996, noted that since he left the position, approximately 200 fewer personnel were employed by the DOT, indicating that substantial belt-tightening had already become necessary.

In conclusion, the commissioner stated that a good transportation system was critical to New Hampshire's quality of life and therefore it was critical to keep investing in the system. "You won't get good jobs in New Hampshire without good roads," he said, adding that "without good jobs, the state's young people will leave."

Good Roads Make Good Sense

A well maintained transportation infrastructure provides multiple benefits for all citizens of New Hampshire, benefits that affect not only safety, but economics and quality of life as well. For instance, tourists are favorably impressed by smooth roads and well managed traffic flow—which definitely helps "bring them back for more." Indeed, the impact that good infrastructure has on the tourism, lodging, and restaurant industries is extremely important to the financial well being of the state.

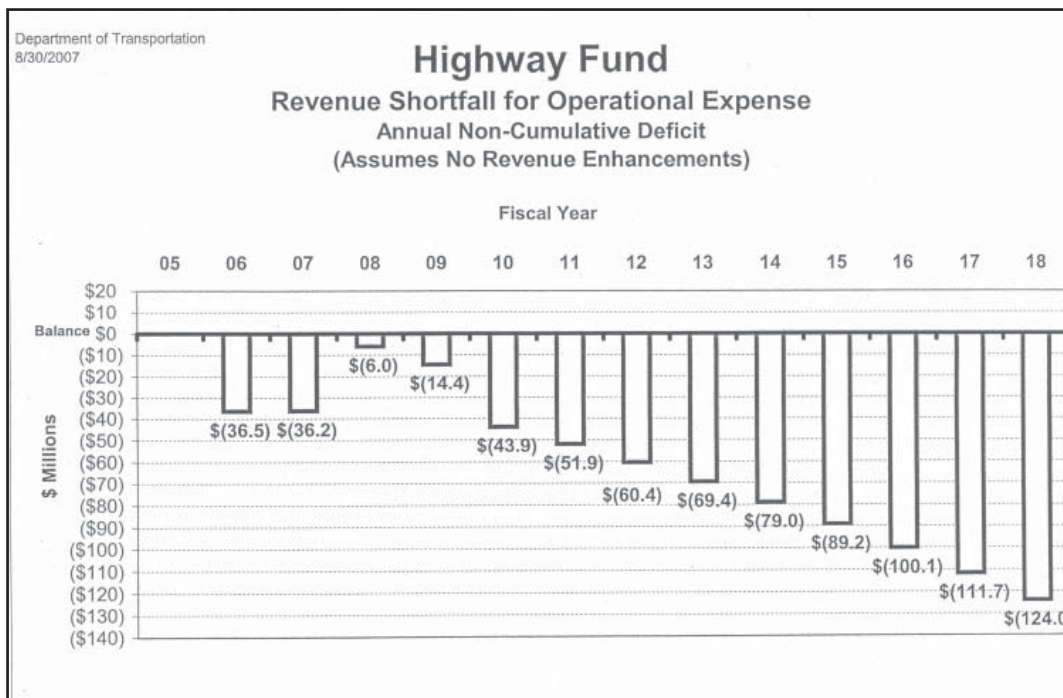


On a broader note, New Hampshire's business community relies on good roads to provide hassle-free delivery and shipping corridors. Also, well kept roads encourage businesses to not only to stay in New Hampshire but they also help sway new businesses towards locating here and contributing to the state's economy. And finally, roads that are properly maintained and upgraded as necessary are safer roads, which means that members of the safety and law enforcement community have a vital interest in the timely upkeep of our highways.

When the New Hampshire Legislature next convenes, the findings/recommendations of the Highway Fund Study Commission will be of critical importance to everyone who lives, works, and travels in the Granite State. Individually and in groups, it is up to all of us to convince our senators and representatives in Concord that it's time to put our highways and bridges in order and to devise a fiscal strategy that will keep our infrastructure sound.



A Safer Road to Tomorrow
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DOT projected a budgeted shortfall of \$18.8M and \$12.6M respectively FY 2006 and 2007. The actual deficit was \$36.5M and \$36.2M as a result of a decrease in road tax revenue and increase in project expense due to floods.

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