

Infrastructure

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Problem

Since President Bush took office, tragedy after tragedy has proven that our national infrastructure is broken. Whether blackouts in California and the Northeast, flooding in New Orleans and the Midwest, or a bridge collapsing in Minnesota, the Bush administration has blamed anyone but itself. Sadly, for the last eight years President Bush has been an obstacle to fixing our infrastructure needs, at times even taking action to make the situation worse.

Roads

- Thirty-four percent of roads are in poor or mediocre condition.¹
- Driving on roads in need of repair costs U.S. motorists \$54 billion per year in repairs and operating costs—\$275 per motorist.²
- Americans spend 3.5 billion hours a year stuck in traffic, costing the economy \$63.1 billion in wasted time and fuel costs and resulting in a “time and fuel tax” of \$322 per motorist.³
- Commuters waste 5.7 billion gallons of gas annually,⁴ which is equivalent to over 75% of the total amount of oil imported from Iraq.⁵
- Total government spending (all levels) on roads must increase by 42% just to maintain the same (poor or mediocre) road conditions.

Bridges

- Over a quarter of U.S. bridges—160,000—are rated structurally deficient or structurally obsolete.⁶
- Nearly one-third of our urban bridges (which are the most used) are structurally deficient or structurally obsolete.
- It will cost \$9.4 billion a year for 20 years to repair these bridges, and an additional \$7.3 billion to prevent increasing maintenance backlogs, while the current spending is only \$8.8 billion (2003 data).

Water systems

- Nearly half of U.S. waterway locks are functionally obsolete.⁷
- Recently, the entire Ohio River system was closed due to water infrastructure failures.⁸

- Since 1998, the number of unsafe dams has risen by 33% to more than 3,500.⁹ There were 67 dam incidents—events such as large floods, earthquakes, or inspections that alert dam safety engineers to deficiencies that threaten the safety of a dam—and 29 dam failures in the last two years.
- Overall, the American Society of Civil Engineers gives our navigable waterway system a D- grade (down from a D+ in 2001), and gives our dam system a D.

Schools

- Investments in school facilities have not kept pace with student population increases; in fact, during Bush’s tenure the student population has grown by 3% (an increase of 6.5 million students),¹⁰ while spending on school infrastructure has *decreased* by 25%, down \$1.8 billion.¹¹
- A 1999 Department of Education report found that 76% of all public schools reported that they needed more money (an estimated \$127 billion¹²) to spend on repairs, renovations, and modernizations to bring their facilities into good overall condition.¹³
- In 2000, the National Education Association estimated that an additional \$322 billion in spending on school infrastructure is necessary.¹⁴
- According to a 2005 Department of Education survey, 43% of schools indicated that the condition of their permanent facilities “interferes with the delivery of instruction,”¹⁵ with heating and air conditioning being the most common complaint.
- Both the Department of Education and the Environmental Protection Agency have found that “poor environments in schools due primarily to effects of indoor pollutants adversely influence the health, performance, and attendance of students.”¹⁶

Other infrastructure needs

In the information-driven economy, high-speed Internet access is playing an increasingly important role in the economy and in the lives of U.S. residents. Yet, the United States currently ranks just 15th of the 30 developed countries in overall broadband penetration.¹⁷

Many other infrastructure systems, such as the electric power grid, wastewater treatment, airports and aviation, and rail transit are also in dire need. Overall, the American Society of Civil Engineers has estimated that the United States would need to spend \$320 billion every year for five years to rebuild and repair our national infrastructure.¹⁸

Bush’s record

President Bush opposed additional revenue sources for the Highway Trust Fund, even as revenues fell short and could not meet the increased transportation infrastructure spending needs.¹⁹

- As a share of the economy, receipts for the Highway Transportation Fund decreased from 0.31% to 0.28% of GDP, a 9.7% decrease, while the U.S. Treasury predicts that the Highway Trust Fund will experience a \$3.2 billion deficit in FY2009.²⁰
- A threatened veto to a bill to restore the Trust Fund, HR 6532, which passed with overwhelming support from Republicans, but that Bush nonetheless opposes, would put hundreds of highway projects in jeopardy.²¹

President Bush starved the government of resources, making it incapable of even maintaining the existing infrastructure (not to mention the new infrastructure necessary for growth) without deficit spending.

- His 2001 and 2003 tax cuts resulted in a \$1.2 trillion revenue loss between 2001 and 2006,²² estimated to grow to \$2 trillion by 2010.²³ (These figures do not include the additional revenue losses from fixing the Alternative Minimum Tax.)

President Bush waged (and insists on continuing) an expensive war in Iraq that has further starved the government of resources it could use to build and maintain public infrastructure.

- Despite promises that it would cost \$50-\$60 billion, the war in Iraq has already cost over \$500 billion, or \$12 billion per month. These figures understate the war's true economic costs, as they do not include interest payments and a depleted military, which, if included, would bring the cost up to \$1.4 trillion.²⁴
- That cost doubles, up to \$3 trillion, when secondary costs—such as veterans' health care and disability pay—are also included.²⁵

Bush vetoed the Water Resources Development Act of 2007, which authorized flood control and navigation projects, despite the dire needs of our water infrastructure system—most evident in the systems failures during Hurricane Katrina. For example, nearly half of our canal locks are obsolete. Congress overrode his veto. Contents of the bill include:²⁶

- Improving the Illinois Waterway System and upper Mississippi River (Title XIII).
- Restoring Louisiana's hurricane and flood protection infrastructure and providing for coastal restoration (Title XII).
- Conducting studies for flood damage reduction, emergency streambank protection, navigation, and shoreline protection (Title I).
- Providing more resources for Everglades protection (Title XI).

- Creating a National Levee Safety Program (Title IX).
- In the wake of the I-35 bridge collapse in Minnesota, Bush opposed a bill that would have repaired 6,175 structurally deficient bridges.²⁷
- Bush opposed Congressional leadership efforts to include job-creating infrastructure spending in the economic stimulus package.²⁸
- Bush cut the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Hurricane Protection Project, which was responsible for building new levees, enlarging existing levees, and updating other protections like floodwalls. He cut the project's 2004 budget by 73% and its 2005 budget by 83%. Between 2001 and 2005, the federal government *decreased* its spending on infrastructure in New Orleans by 44%.²⁹
- Bush's Department of Housing and Urban Development handed out contracts based on political affiliation rather than merit.³⁰
- According to Bush's Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, Bush did not take seriously the problem of the failing transportation infrastructure, despite Secretary Mineta's efforts to sway him.³¹

Overall, the Bush administration has been a poor steward of our infrastructure, which has steadily deteriorated since 2001. The American Society of Civil Engineers gave the United States a "D" on its latest infrastructure report card, a decrease from 2001 and the lowest grade in 10 years.

But this is by no means surprising—after all, this lack of performance is from an administration that believes that government is always the problem and never the solution. After years of telling the American people that government is inefficient and cannot solve real problems, Bush seems to have adopted this rhetoric as an actual governing philosophy, and the result is an infrastructure that is more deficient, less safe, and less secure.

Notes

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- ⁵ “U.S. Imports by Country of Origin: Total Crude Oil and Products.” *Energy Information Administration*
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- ⁷ “Report Card for America’s Infrastructure.” *American Society of Civil Engineers*, 2005
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- ⁸ “Report Card for America’s Infrastructure: Navigable Waterways.” *American Society of Civil Engineers*, 2005
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- ⁹ “Report Card for America’s Infrastructure.” *American Society of Civil Engineers*, 2005
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- ¹⁹ “Statement of Administration Policy: HR 6532.” *Office of Management and Budget*, July 23, 2008
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