Funding for Steel Bridges

BY BRIAN RAFF

Although current infrastructure trends appear bleak, now is the time we all should be contacting our federal, state and local leaders.

IT IS ABUNDANTLY OBVIOUS to even the most casual observer that all of us in the United States have a mess on our hands regarding the deteriorating quality of the transportation infrastructure. Why are we in this mess to begin with? I wish we could blame the poor state of our nation's infrastructure on the current economy. Unfortunately, we're looking at a much longer-term, systemic problem. It has taken more than a few years to rack up a 25% share of structurally deficient and functionally obsolete bridges among our inventory of more than 604,000.

The majority of bridges in this country were built in the 1950s and 1960s, such that the average bridge in our current inventory is 43 years old. While material and coating technologies today suggest a bridge lifespan of almost 100 years, that wasn't the case 60 years ago. The majority of our nation's bridges are now reaching the end of their service lives at a time when money isn't available to repair or replace them.

Surprisingly, the percentage of deficient bridges (both structurally deficient and/or functionally obsolete) has decreased from 35% in 1992 to 25% in 2010. That figure, on the surface, makes it seem like we're headed in the right direction. In recent years, states like Oklahoma and Missouri have made tremendous strides to improve their inventories. However, while states have maintenance and rehabilitation programs to ensure their assets remain safe and remain in service, they constantly battle funding shortages, preventing them from addressing any critical infrastructure issues that may arise. Under better economic circumstances, funding was available, and states removed or replaced deficient bridges with new ones, automatically improving their deficiency percentages. With uncertainty looming over the details of the next transportation bill, one thing *is* certain: transportation investment levels will decrease, and some predict up to a 35% reduction in transportation-related investment in the first year under the new bill. This means it will be difficult, if not impossible, for federal, state, and local agencies to plan ahead. If states have no projects in their pipelines, designers, contractors, manufacturers, and construction workers as well as their local communities will all feel the negative impact of unemployment.

How do we get ourselves out of this mess? The main solution to our transportation predicament boils down to funding. Congress passed a six-month extension to the nation's surface transportation program on September 15, 2011—the eighth such extension—authorizing $24.78 billion in spending from the Highway Trust Fund (at current funding levels) until March 31, 2012. While this Band-Aid solution keeps government employees working and allows the Highway Trust Fund to continue collecting revenues, we still find ourselves facing a significant funding shortfall to keep our roads and bridges in safe, working order.

How Much Should the Federal Government Spend on Highways?

On May 11, 2011, Joseph Kile, Assistant Director for Microeconomics for the Congressional Budget Office, sub-

Breakdown of the U.S. National Bridge Inventory

	1992		2010		1992–2010
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Change
Structurally Deficient	118,736	20.7%	69,223	11.4%	–9.3%
Functionally Obsolete	80,436	14.0%	77,395	12.8%	–1.2%
Total Deficient	199,172	34.7%	146,618	24.2%	–10.5%
Total Inventory	**572,524**	**100%**	**604,426**	**100%**	**+5.6%**

The number of deficient bridges in the National Bridge Inventory actually has gone down since 1992. However, the problem is still significant, with 24.2% of the nation's bridges—146,618 of them—either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

mitted testimony before the Senate Committee on Finance about funding for highways and bridges. His testimony systematically lays out four options for future spending.

- Limit spending to the amount that is collected in current taxes on fuel and other transportation activities; doing so would result in spending that would be about $13 billion per year below the current amount.
- Maintain current capital spending, adjusted for inflation.
- Spend enough to maintain the current performance of the highway system; doing so would require about $14 billion per year more than current spending.
- Fund projects whose benefits exceed their costs; doing so would require even more spending than maintaining current services, up to about $50 billion more than current spending, depending on the degree to which benefits would be expected to exceed costs.

To put things into context, total federal spending on capital highway infrastructure projects in 2010 was $43 billion. Therefore, the federal government would need to spend $57 billion a year to maintain the current performance of the highway system, and would need to spend more than $93 billion a year to make significant improvements to our bridge inventory, more than doubling current federal spending.

To read Joseph Kile's full testimony, download it from the Congressional Budget Office at **http://1.usa.gov/p6tDrW**.

It is important to remember that only a portion of the federal surface transportation funding goes toward bridge work. Although the spending levels enabled by the current funding extension will keep the doors open, it won't even be enough to maintain the current inventory let alone improve it. As mentioned above, current proposals for a new highway bill are not looking to maintain current funding levels, but actually cut investment levels by up to 35%. That's why this is a critical time for action.

It's Time to Speak Up

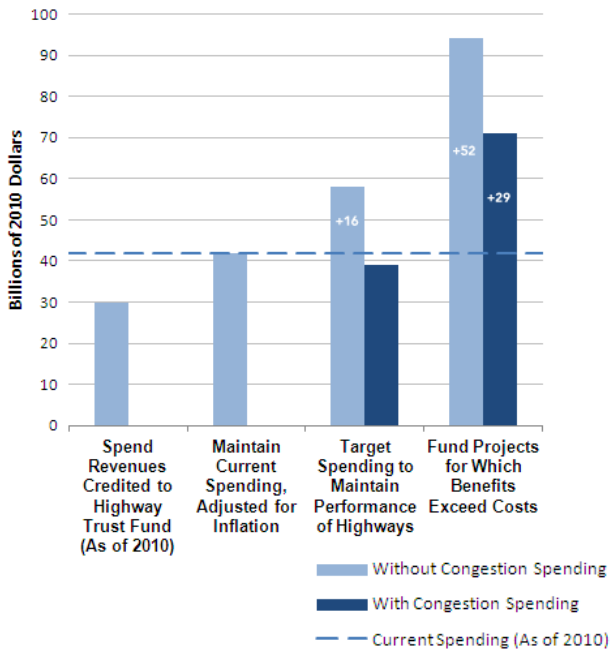
From this point in time, we only have six months to give our representatives in Congress our most compelling and personal reasons why passing a robust, multiyear, surface transportation reauthorization bill is the best thing for our country and our industry.

Our industry must act immediately, presenting a unified, resounding voice to elected officials, educating them on the risks associated with inaction and under-investment in transportation and infrastructure. Perhaps the most telling analogy is the television commercial for oil filters—"Pay me now or pay me later." Delaying investment in bridge infrastructure today will result in significantly greater costs down the road in terms of both actual infrastructure costs and economic disruption.

AISC's Legislative Action page (**www.aisc.org/action**) is set up to help you and your colleagues reach out to elected officials with a tailored message, stressing the importance of a long-term, fully funded transportation bill. When you contact your Congressmen, they will also want to know how bridge construction will affect jobs, to which the response is both simple and compelling. You can tell them that a comprehensive 2010 report by ARTBA's economics and research team has quantified the enormous impacts of the transportation construction industry on the national and state economies. The study, "The U.S. Transportation Construction Industry Profile," shows that each year money invested in transportation construction industry employment and purchases generates more than $380 billion in U.S. economic activity—nearly 3% of the nation's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). That's larger than the annual GDP of 160 nations ranked by the International Monetary Fund, including oil-rich Saudi Arabia ($370 billion) and Kuwait ($111 billion). Clearly reauthorization of a strong transportation bill is a good investment in America.

We only have six months to influence the most important legislation affecting our industry and our lives. Don't wait; take action! MSC

Selected Options for Annual Federal Capital Spending for Highways, With and Without Congestion



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