



Washington State DOT / Flickr

## America's Infrastructure Crisis Is Really a Maintenance Crisis

ERIC JAFFE | FEBRUARY 12, 2015

[THIS IS AN EXCERPT OF THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE, CLICK HERE TO VIEW ONLINE.](#)

It's long been time to focus more on maintaining America's existing roads and less on building new ones. The National Highway System already connects virtually all of the areas worth connecting. Driving peaked circa 2004—and even earlier in some states. Traffic remains bad in many metros, but by itself expanding road networks can only temporarily alleviate the problem, and over time might even increase it.

**And yet we build. We build without seeming to appreciate that every mile of fresh new road will one day become a mile of crumbling old road that needs additional attention.** We build even though our pot of road funding requires increasingly creative (and arguably illegal) solutions to stay anything other than empty.

The numbers tell the story best. From 2004 to 2008, states dedicated just 43 percent of their road budgets to maintain existing roads despite the fact that they made up nearly 99 percent of the road system. The other 1 percent—new construction—got more than half the money. From 2009 to 2011 states did only marginally better, spending 55 percent of their road money (\$20.4 billion) on expansion and just 45 percent on maintenance (\$16.5 billion):

In other words, we need to use all the available road money each year to fix our roads, and then some, to prevent them from falling into a state of disrepair that endangers public safety. And the more roads we build, the more we need to one day fix.

## Tyranny of the Ribbon

The hard political work begins with the tyranny of the ribbon. Of the many reasons infrastructure repairs get snubbed for construction, big public ribbon-cutting ceremonies that come with fresh projects—but not with stale maintenance—is near the top of the list. By the nature of their limited tenure and uncertain futures, politicians care more about attaching their name to a new project than extending the life of someone else's old one.

Smart Growth America suggests we "raise the profile of repair and preservation projects." That's easier said than done, and when done wrong the results can be disastrous. Take that time, in 2005, when then-Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger tried to call public attention to road maintenance—by having a crew dig a pothole only to fill it:

In general, public ceremonies for maintenance just end up drawing little attention. During my recent conversation with MARTA chief Keith Parker, he said the Atlanta transit system had a tunnel ventilation project underway that may cost upwards of \$200 million, and a radio system upgrade that will cost up to \$50 million, and of course regular track enhancements and repairs—investments that, while necessary, will prevent the agency from doing what Parker called "sexier" expansion projects.

"When we tell people, 'hey, come out because we're going to have a celebration for the Clayton County expansion,' we expect a long line of people," he said. "When we say, 'hey look, we want to celebrate the tunnel ventilation project,' I don't think we'll get so many."

The media isn't blameless here. Just as politicians are loath to cut ribbons for infrastructure repairs, news organizations and bloggers prefer to hype new and shinier projects in the pipeline—or to wait until deferred maintenance causes a high-profile tragedy. There's no single or simple way to reverse America's growing infrastructure crisis, but reframing it as a maintenance crisis is a good place to start.