

Number of bridge repair projects drops as Maine DOT struggles to find funding

Don Eno | Fiddlehead Focus

The Madawasaka Bridge is shown here in 2016. Big projects like the Madawasaka Bridge tend to crowd out smaller projects competing for funding.



By [Caitlin Andrews](#), BDN Staff • January 16, 2020

AUGUSTA, Maine — Maine's [struggle to fund its transportation system](#) has not affected the amount of structurally deficient bridges in the state, but that [lack of funding has led to patchwork repairs and closing some bridges altogether rather than dealing with true costs of repair.](#)

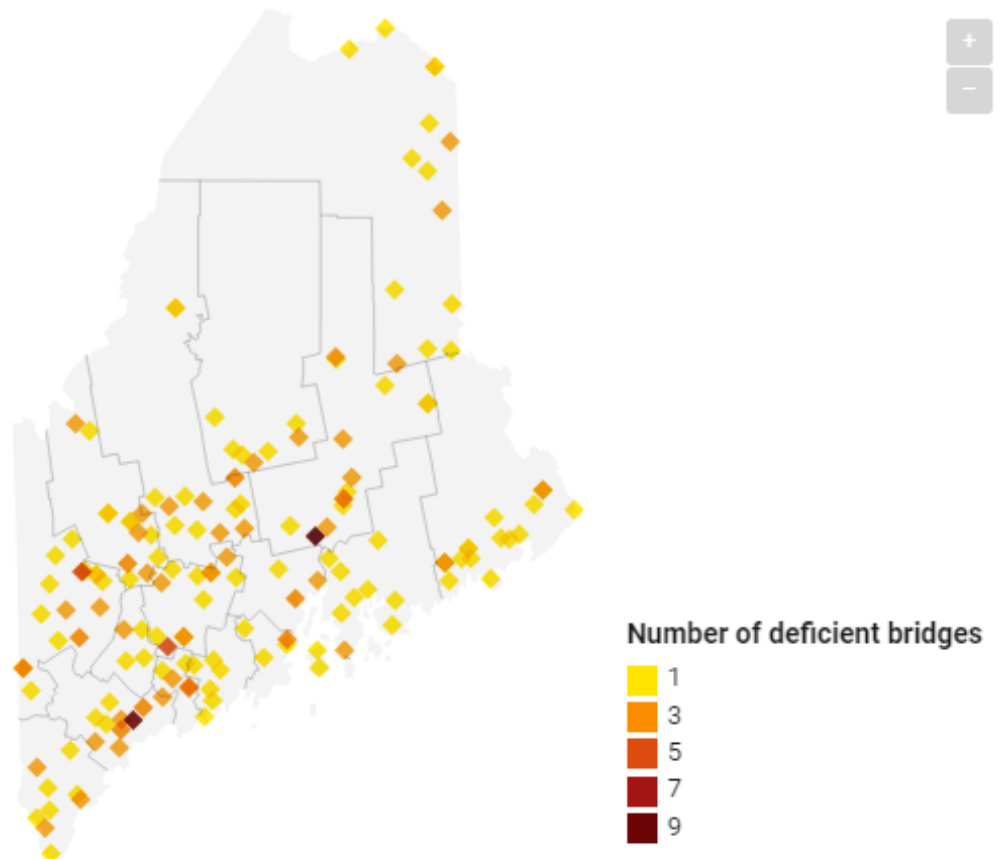
The share of [structurally deficient bridges](#) — any bridge that has advanced section loss, deterioration of material or erosion of base soil — has hovered in the teens since 2001, according to Maine Department of Transportation data. It was above 15 percent then and was [around 12 percent last fall.](#)

That's not to say those projects haven't been affected by a \$233 million annual funding shortfall. The state's [three-year work plan](#) released Tuesday shows the number of bridge projects have decreased since 2017 and are expected to drop from 79 last year to 45 this year despite the plan having \$150 million more than the past three years, due to an influx of federal grants.

Department officials say they fear losing ground on smaller projects while bigger, higher-priority bridges take up more space. National data show a trend of spending more money on patching up the infrastructure rather than making substantial improvements.

Bridges deemed structurally deficient

According to the Maine Department of Transportation, 248 bridges were deemed structurally deficient as of 2019.



Funding for infrastructure is a long-running, national problem. Joyce Taylor, the chief engineer for the transportation department, says the state has been able to stave bridges off from getting worse by doing preservation work. She worries such efforts won't last long, noting big projects — such as an \$85 million planned replacement of the International Bridge in Madawaska using \$35 million in federal money — can crowd smaller projects out.

"We have to ask, 'Are we going to lose ground on other projects?'" she said.

Paul Merrill, a spokesperson for the department, said the state has been relying on surface treatment on bridges that need work, but are not high-priority structures. Spot-repairing infrastructure is a national trend,

according to the Brookings Institution, a nonprofit public policy research organization.

It found [last spring](#) that total spending on infrastructure maintenance increased by 9.5 percent during the past decade, even while total public spending has fallen. Transportation is the most expensive part of U.S. infrastructure, and Brookings found spending on it dropped by \$4.2 billion from 2007 to 2017, or 1.4 percent, with a sharp decline happening just after the Great Recession and has been increasing from 2012 on.

States and localities have been “entirely responsible” for the rebound, which has focused on operations and maintenance spending. Maine expects to spend \$545 million on 148 bridge projects and \$10.1 million in bridge and structural maintenance over the next three years.

What determines whether a bridge needs to be replaced varies. Taylor said in a fall interview that the state follows [national guidelines](#) to determine the status of its bridges, which must be inspected every two years. A committee of engineers meets every two weeks to discuss which bridges may need attention or to be closed.

There’s no “deterioration curve” to follow, so Taylor said state engineers tend to evaluate a bridge based on its how much weight they believe it can carry and its condition. If pieces have eroded, or a bridge moves down, up or sideways, it’s probably time to close it, she said.

Age can be a factor, but material is also important. Taylor said many interstate bridges were built with a light steel that is not as durable as current materials. Areas that see heavy truck traffic are likely to see bridges deteriorate faster.

Bridges close when the department cannot afford to fix them — or don’t think it’s worth it. Taylor described it as “managing the decline of our system” — allowing some lower priority bridges to deteriorate to the point that they have to be posted to weight limits.

For structurally deficient bridges that may only detour drivers a few miles out of their way, Taylor said they might consider closing those structures for good. The state has only closed 10 bridges in the past five years, Taylor said. One of those bridges is on Rawson Avenue in Camden, built in 1935 and closed permanently this April.

Jeremy Martin, who heads the planning department for the town, said the state approached the town and told them the bridge would not be replaced because of its condition and its low traffic volume. Replacing the bridge would have cost around \$1 million, Martin said, which was too expensive for the town to consider.

He said the state has now committed to covering half of the \$150,000 cost for turning it into a pedestrian bridge. Martin said the bridge is heavily used by children walking to the nearby middle school. If it wasn't replaced, he said it would be dangerous.

"Certainly if they had to go over Route 1, we'd have to replace it, no question," he said. "Rawson [Avenue] has hardly any traffic — there are no easy alternatives."

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MaineDOT Joyce Taylor Chief Engineer

How about those 142 projects that have been put on hold while the DOT continues to bank millions of our limited transportation dollars on the I-395/Route 9 Connector? If she was so worried about a \$85 million bridge, why isn't she as worried about a \$100 million connector?