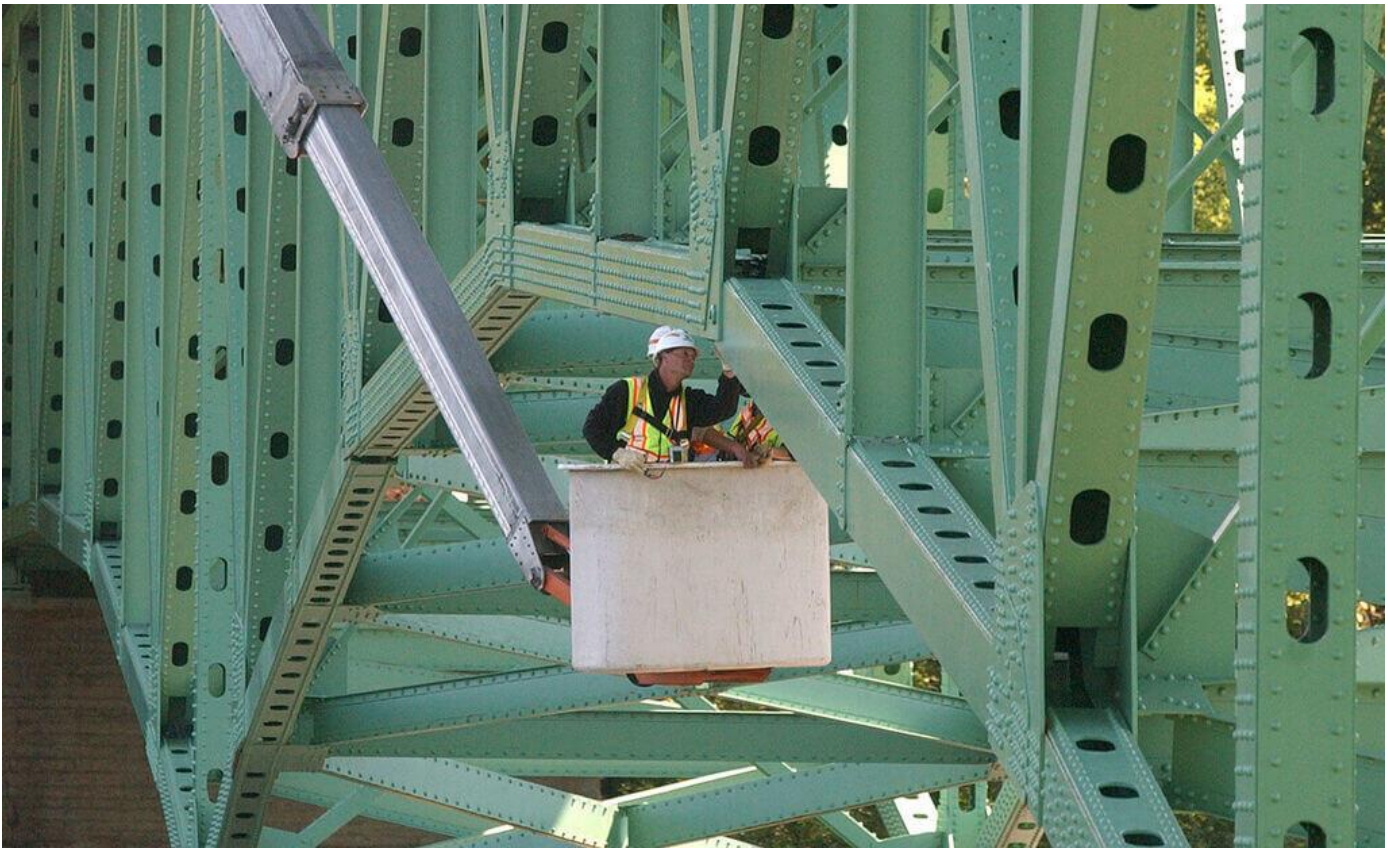


Maine's bridges are in worse condition than most states

Nick Schroeder | 4.06.2021 | [Click here to view online](#)



In this August 2007 file photo, DOT bridge inspectors Scott Haris and Jamie Hannun (right, obscured) inspect the Aroostook River Bridge on Route 161 in Caribou. Credit: Gabor Degre / BDN

Maine's bridges are in worse condition than almost every other state in the U.S., with early 13 percent of the state's inventory in poor condition, according to [Federal Highway Administration](#) data.

With 2,472 local and federal bridges, Maine's total inventory is smaller than most U.S. states. Still, 315 of those, or 12.7 percent, are deemed to be in "poor" condition, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Another 1,431 are in "fair" condition.

Only five states — Iowa, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Dakota and West Virginia — have a greater percentage of bridges in poor condition among 51 U.S. states and territories including Puerto Rico for which data is available.

The high rate of structurally deficient bridges in Maine suggests the state could particularly stand to benefit from a national plan that addresses the decline of its transportation infrastructure.

President Joe Biden unveiled a proposal for a \$2.3 trillion federal infrastructure plan that would repair the country's bridges, ports, highways, public transit and other public investments. The plan would be largely funded by raising the corporate tax rate to 28 percent, partly reversing Trump-era legislation that lowered it from 35 to 21 percent in 2017.

A robust federal plan could alleviate longstanding partisan tension among Maine lawmakers, who have grappled for years over how to pay for needed transportation costs. In 2011, state Republicans and then-Gov. Paul LePage nixed a law indexing a state gas tax to rising consumer prices that helped pay for routine road and bridge maintenance. That policy change, along with fuel-efficient vehicles making gas tax revenues less reliable, has set the stage for transportation budget battles in the state legislature.

Transportation funding pulls from many sources. Roughly 31 percent of MaineDOT's \$2.71 billion three-year work plan comes from state Highway Fund revenues, mostly sourced from gas taxes. Federal funds account for roughly 44 percent of work plan funding, with another 14 percent coming from bond packages traditionally passed by voters, who traditionally support them by a wide margin.

Borrowed money in the form of bond packages have helped plug annual funding gaps for much of the last decade, but the state's transportation budget gap has widened. In 2019, Gov. Janet Mills, a Democrat, convened the panel to find funding solutions to cover the gap after Republicans opposed a \$239 million infrastructure package. The nonpartisan commission found a \$232 million annual shortfall in the state's transportation budget, but it punted most funding decisions to the next Legislature weeks before the pandemic reached Maine.

Maine's bridges most in need of help are concentrated in northern and rural areas. Only 59 of Penobscot County's 295 bridges are in "good" condition, according to the federal DOT, while 42 are in "poor" condition. Hancock, Washington and Somerset counties have the highest percentages of bridges in "poor" condition, each totaling more than 20 percent.

The state fell behind in its bridge maintenance because of the pandemic, according to Maine Department of Transportation spokesperson Paul Merrill.

"The social distancing requirements have slowed our ability to maintain our bridges," Merrill said. "The work is getting done, but it does take a little longer."

Still, the department was able to take advantage of low traffic numbers early in the pandemic to do work they normally couldn't, Merrill said. The state has several dozen bridge repair projects currently under construction.

Transportation Commissioner Bruce Van Note issued a statement of support for the Biden Administration's infrastructure plan, which the President has termed the American Jobs Plan, saying such investments "pay off."

"Long-term, sustainable funding solutions that allow us to improve — not just maintain — our transportation system are important to Maine people, our economy and our future success," Van Note said in a statement. "They improve public safety, support economic opportunity, build quality communities and improve our environment and climate for future generations."

The American Society of Civil Engineers, an independent group, gave Maine's infrastructure a C- grade last year.