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U.S. Infrastructure Is in Dire Straits, Report Says

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More than a quarter of the nation's bridges are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. Leaky pipes lose an estimated seven billion gallons of clean drinking water every day. And aging sewage systems send billions of gallons of untreated wastewater cascading into the nation's waterways each year.

These are among the findings of a report to be released Wednesday by the American Society of Civil Engineers, which assigned an overall D grade to the nation's infrastructure and estimated that it would take a \$2.2 trillion investment from all levels of government over the next five years to bring it into a state of good repair.

The society had planned to release the report in March, but moved it up to try to influence the debate over the \$825 billion economic stimulus bill being negotiated by the Obama administration and Congress. Advocates for greater investment in public works projects have expressed disappointment that less than a third of the current proposal — which could be approved by the House on Wednesday — would be spent on infrastructure, and an even smaller part of that would go toward traditional concrete-and-steel projects like roads and transit.

“Crumbling infrastructure has a direct impact on our personal and economic health, and the nation's infrastructure crisis is endangering our future prosperity,” the president of the society, D. Wayne Klotz, said in a statement. “Our leaders are looking for solutions to the nation's current economic crisis. Not only could investment in these critical foundations have a positive impact, but if done responsibly, it would also provide tangible benefits to the American people, such as reduced traffic congestion, improved air quality, clean and abundant water supplies and protection against natural hazards.”

The current [stimulus plan](#) is weighted toward tax cuts, aid to the states, and an expanded safety net for people struggling to make ends meet. Much of the infrastructure spending it does contain would be in unusual areas. The plan devotes money to creating a database of health records, for example, and would spend more money making federal buildings energy-efficient than on repairing roads and bridges. In part this is because of questions about how soon major building projects can begin, because the goal of the bill is to inject money into the parched economy as quickly as possible.

The American Society of Civil Engineers, which has been sounding the alarm about the nation's deteriorating infrastructure for years, and whose members would benefit from a major new investment in building and repair projects, paints a bleak picture of the state of the nation's roads, transit systems, aviation system and levees. And it warned that in area after area, spending was being far outpaced by needs.

The society gave the nation's roads a D-minus, noting that Americans are spending an estimated 4.2 billion

hours a year stuck in traffic and that 45 percent of major urban highways are congested. Transit and aviation did not fare much better, getting D grades. The society noted that while mass transit use increased 25 percent from 1995 to 2005, nearly half of American households still lacked access to bus or rail transit. And it said that the increasing delays faced by airline passengers highlighted the need to modernize the outdated air traffic control system.

For the first time, this year the group examined the nation's levees, and gave them a D-minus. The report warned that many of the nation's levees were built more than 50 years ago to protect crops, but now protect communities. It warned that the cost of repairing and rehabilitating them could exceed \$100 billion.

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