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Is Illinois Infrastructure in “Patch and Pray” Mode?

By Jim Nowlan

Recently *The New York Times* featured infrastructure catastrophes that have plagued different parts of the country, like the tiny electrical fire in a nearly century-old switching contraption on the Long Island Rail Road that disrupted 100,000 commuters for days. So I took a look at the status of our roads, bridges, water, sewer systems and more to see how we’re doing in Illinois. The picture isn’t pretty.

The Illinois Society of Civil Engineers puts out a report card on the state’s infrastructure and gives us a D+ overall, saying we need to invest scores of billions of dollars to bring our systems up to snuff.

Much of our infrastructure is just too old. In my hometown of Toulon (60 miles southeast of the Quad-Cities), the water and sewer systems go back to 1900. We have had three water main breaks on the 12-inch lines in recent months. “I’d like to see the pipes that go back to 1900 replaced,” sighs Shane Milroy, the public works director. Nearby Peoria has been suffering water main breaks on its 100-year-old system as well. Some Illinois cities still use wooden pipes to transport their water.

The civil engineers’ society, which clearly has a vested interest in infrastructure, rates 34 percent of our highways as in poor or mediocre condition and 18 percent of our bridges as structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, meaning that they can’t carry

today's heavy loads or big vehicles. Highway and rail freight congestion rates in Chicagoland are among the highest in the country. Illinois handles more rail cars than any state in the nation, yet it takes a freight rail car as long to get through Chicagoland as it does to come from the West Coast.

Randy Blankenhorn is executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning (CMAP). He gives the region's infrastructure an A- for breadth but a D for basic condition. He doesn't think the region needs much more infrastructure; instead, the region needs to maintain and modernize what it has. Blankenhorn points out that between now and 2040, \$385 billion will be spent on transportation infrastructure in the Chicago region, yet only \$10 billion of that will go for new projects. Most will go for maintenance and modernization.

"We don't need more roads," declares Christopher King, head of an engineering firm and president of the Illinois Society of Civil Engineers. "We need smarter roads, with congestion pricing and better signage information."

And better mass transit. Mass transit in Chicago is really hurting—aging, uncomfortable cars and a rickety system. Capital needs are over \$10 billion over the coming five years, yet capital funding is less than \$2.7 billion, and that hasn't been released yet.

"We have to think bigger about transit," says Blankenhorn. "The same companies that are building sleek, comfortable, wi-fi enabled cars for China are building for us the same old cars we've bought for years. Yet we somehow want transit to be the first choice for more residents."

Money is the problem, says everyone I talked with. Illinois passed a \$31 billion capital construction bill in 2008, with money for roads, school buildings and water systems. They provided, however, unusual funding to pay for the construction bonding—a video gaming tax, increases in candy and soda pop taxes and increased beer and liquor taxes. The video gaming has not been implemented yet, and much of the program is unfunded as of this date.

In Washington, Congress is hesitant to fund a new multi-year transportation bill while the economy is in the tank, which I would think is just the time to put people to work.

Ultimately, any major infrastructure programs are going to have to rely on user fees—motor fuel taxes, sewer and water fees, for example. “More money is a tough sell,” says Blankenhorn, “but the solutions are not free.”

When money is available, the demand is there. Recently the state of Illinois used federal stimulus to provide money for community water projects. There were 10 applicant communities for every project funded.

Federal, state and local funds will all be needed to address our infrastructure deficits, yet civil engineer King doesn’t see any light at the end of the funding tunnel. Meanwhile, our creaking infrastructure continues to age and deteriorate, while we “patch and pray.”