

## Are hundreds of Indiana's key bridges wearing out?

Closed Ohio River span just one of hundreds in state that have problems, feds say

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It normally buzzes with traffic, carrying 80,000 [cars](#) and trucks a day over the Ohio River between Southern Indiana and Louisville, Ky. It's definitely the bridge to somewhere.

But since Gov. Mitch Daniels ordered the six-lane I-64 bridge closed Sept. 9, shortly after inspectors found cracks in two critical support beams, it's been the bridge to nowhere, and motorists have been fuming as they look for alternative routes across the Ohio River.

Bearing the brunt: the nearby I-65 bridge, where all the extra traffic is adding delays of an hour or more, especially on the southbound lanes into Louisville during the morning rush hour.

"It's horrible. Every morning, there's a seven-mile backup in the area," said Ron Druck, operations manager at L.J. Rogers [Trucking's](#) office in New Albany, just north of the river.

Also feeling the pinch are commuters who cross the river to get to work, and local businesses that draw customers from across the river, from casinos in Southern Indiana to restaurants and museums in downtown Louisville.

Such traffic woes aren't being felt in Central Indiana, but the closing does raise one question that could resonate across the state: How many other Indiana bridges are below standard, and how much will it cost to fix them?

As of December, Indiana had 469 state-maintained bridges that were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, according to the Federal Highway Administration. That's up from 371 in December 2004, a month before Daniels took office.

The number doesn't include thousands of other bridges owned and maintained by counties, cities and towns.

Nationally, Indiana ranks 26th for the overall condition of its bridges, according to a recent study by Transportation for America, a coalition of [business](#) and citizen groups pushing for transportation reform.

"Today, one out of every nine bridges that motorists in Indiana cross each day are likely to be deteriorating to some degree," the study said.

And the [money](#) needed to bring them up to standards is staggering. It would cost more than \$3.5 billion to repair or replace Indiana's deficient bridges, according to a recent report by the American Society of Civil Engineers. The group gives Indiana a grade of C+ for bridges and a D+ for overall infrastructure, which also includes roads, airports, dams, water systems and other categories.

Last month, the Indiana Department of Transportation told a study committee of the General Assembly that even if the state were to spend \$100 million a year on bridge maintenance, 58 percent of the state's bridges would be in less-than-satisfactory condition by 2035.

In an interview Monday, INDOT officials said it was too soon to say how much the state needs to spend on bridge maintenance.

"The sweet spot is somewhere in the range of \$300 million a year, but it would be premature to say that's what we're intending to spend," said Michael B. Cline, INDOT's commissioner.

He said 87 percent of the state's 5,000 bridges are in excellent, good or satisfactory condition.

"We're confident that our bridges are in good condition," he said. "To say a piece of infrastructure is deteriorating, yes, that's true. Over time, it gets wear and tear. It's our job to invest the dollars we have to keep them in good, serviceable order.

He said the state has spent \$2.9 billion in the past five years to maintain and repair bridges and roads, out of a total capital budget of \$6.5 billion.

But some Indiana groups say the Daniels administration should be spending more than it does to repair old bridges and highways. They fault the state for spending heavily on new highway projects, such as I-69, at the expense of older roads and bridges.

"It's just outrageous that we would have such appalling upkeep in our state," said Jesse Kharbanda, executive director of the Hoosier Environmental Council. "We've long maintained that Indiana's priorities are misplaced for transportation."

In the past five years, Indiana has raised and spent billions of dollars on roads and bridges with funds generated through the lease of the Indiana Toll Road to a private operator. But only 45 percent of the program's 10-year highway spending program is going toward maintenance and repairs, compared with 55 percent being spent on new construction, according to INDOT's most recent annual report.

"We've got crumbling roads and bridges," said Dan Parker, chairman of the Indiana Democratic Party. "The state should be investing heavily in repairs and maintenance."

But INDOT officials said the spending figures don't reflect the tens of millions of dollars that are spent to replace bridges, including several on I-465. Those projects are often counted as new construction rather than repair and maintenance, Cline said.

He declined to speculate on how long the I-64 bridge might be out of commission or how much repairs might cost. It will take at least two more weeks before engineers complete their inspection of the nearly 50-year-old span, known as the Sherman Minton Bridge, for more structural faults and recommend how to repair it.

Some transportation experts said such a repair is likely to be expensive. The Sherman Minton Bridge is one of the largest and busiest spans in the state.

"It's a unique piece of infrastructure in Indiana," said Dennis Faulkenberg, a former deputy commissioner and chief financial officer at INDOT who is president of Appian, a transportation lobbying firm in Indianapolis. "You don't have funding generally available for such a project."

He said the state's highway and bridge repair funds are generally committed to other projects for the next two years, and a big emergency project could require some re-prioritization of projects.

It remains unclear how much the bridge closing in Southern Indiana is affecting commerce in Central and Northern Indiana.

In Southern Indiana, the impact has been sharp. The Horseshoe Southern Indiana casino saw its business drop by more than 10 percent last weekend after the bridge closed, although the casino said it is starting to bounce back after it began publicizing other routes.

In Central Indiana, Celadon Trucking, a national trucking company based in Indianapolis, said it has provided alternative routing for its drivers and has noticed some delays.

"But it's not a crisis-type situation for us," said Celadon spokesman Monte Horst.

The Indiana Motor Truck Association, which represents hundreds of trucking companies statewide, said the bridge closing is "not stopping commerce," although it is causing anxiety among drivers and shippers.

"Time is money," said Gary Langston, the group's president. "This is costing everybody money, and it is disrupting service."

**The Louisville Courier-Journal contributed to this story.**

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