

**Lack of funding leaves  
Illinois bridges crumbling**

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Author: Blackwell Thomas

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THE SOUTHERN SPRINGFIELD BUREAU SPRINGFIELD - In the Stewardson-Strasburg school district near Effingham the strength of area **bridges** is a worry for Bob Long.

In the seven years he has been the district's transportation coordinator and bus mechanic, Long has watched as more and more **bridges** in the area have been deemed unfit to bear the weight of a school bus loaded with students.

Without access to those **bridges** Long says he must re-draw bus routes, which creates lengthier rides for students, more gas being used and more wear and tear on the buses.

"The lowered weight limits and the (**bridge**) closings affect us on a daily basis," he said. "There are four **bridges** that we have to deal with regularly. One **bridge** has been out for probably four or five years. Another **bridge** used to be a 12-ton (capacity) and they knocked it down to three tons. Some of our buses weigh more than nine tons."

Long's bus routes cut through farmland dotted with houses set acres apart and connected by a handful of county and state **bridges**. And, like **bridges** across the state, many of them are falling into disrepair because of a lack of funding.

"It's getting worse," Long said.

With the third most **bridges** in the country and a budget deficit among the nation's worst, the prospects for maintaining and replacing Illinois' 26,548 aging **bridges** are uncertain.

Gov. Rod Blagojevich's proposed 2008-2013 Highway Improvement Plan calls for \$1.8 billion to address the state's **bridge** needs. But, given the cost of **bridge** construction and repair, and the fact that 4,715 of the state's **bridges** have been deemed deficient, the funds won't be enough to secure all of Illinois' **bridges**.

Illinois Department of Transportation officials said they were unable to determine the cost of repairing all the **bridges**.

All told the governor's plan calls for a total of \$1.75 billion on Illinois roads and **bridges** or about \$100 million less than last year. The funding cutbacks are more drastic when compared to 2002, when the state spent \$4.42 billion, or 2003, when \$3.12 billion was allotted.

Gary Kowalski, an engineer and **bridge** expert for IDOT, said the state's mounting problem is about to get worse.

Kowalski said a **bridge** building boom in the 1960s used deck beam technology, which often consists of a slab of reinforced concrete and metal. Many of these **bridges**, Kowalski said, are in bad shape with the result being an entire generation of the state's **bridges** deteriorating simultaneously.

"There are about 600 of these **bridges** in the state system and I bet more than half of them are in trouble," he said. "But (deck beam **bridges**) are more common on the local level. There are probably about 4,000 to 5,000 of them in Illinois. We've actually had about three or four collapse in the past two or three years."

"The good news," Kowalski said, "is that the state's deck beam **bridges** are subject to more wear and tear because they accommodate more traffic and the state uses a heavy salt brine most towns don't use, which causes quicker deterioration. "

Kowalski said repair costs for deck beam **bridges** vary but \$100,000 is an appropriate number to begin considering repairs for any of the **bridges**.

In Shelby County, engineer Alan Spesard says the use of timber piling technology for **bridge** supports will soon force the county to make tough decisions about the fate of its **bridges**.

As the name implies, timber piling uses wood to provide a foundation for the **bridge**.

Spesard said that, like deck beam technology, timber piling was used in **bridges** across the state during the highway building booms of the 1960's and into the 1970's. And now the state has a generation of **bridges** deteriorating en masse.

"These type of **bridges** were all constructed around the same time and now they are all basically rotting at the same time," Spesard said. "The problem with timber is, once it starts to rot, it rots quickly, whereas concrete and steel takes years. Timber is an issue that is going to be a big deal in the next few years. Deterioration is getting much worse; it's accelerating."

In recognition of the problem in his area, Rep. Bob Flider, D-Mount Zion, proposed a \$30 million spending proposal to repair dilapidated **bridges** across the state.

"Is it the whole solution? No," Flider said. "It's a step in the right direction."

Flider's legislation has won approval in the House and now awaits action in the Senate.

blackwell.thomas@lee.net

(217) 789-0865

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