

Falling apart: America's neglected infrastructure

Steve Kroft reports on why our roads, bridges, airports and rail are outdated and need to be fixed

The following is a script of "Falling Apart" which aired on Nov. 23, 2014. Steve Kroft is the correspondent. James Jacoby, Michael Karzis and Maria Gavrilovic, producers.

There are a lot of people in the United States right now who think the country is falling apart, and at least in one respect they're correct. Our roads and bridges are crumbling, our airports are out of date and the vast majority of our seaports are in danger of becoming obsolete. All the result of decades of neglect. None of this is really in dispute. Business leaders, labor unions, governors, mayors, congressmen and presidents have complained about a lack of funding for years, but aside from a one time cash infusion from the stimulus program, nothing much has changed. There is still no consensus on how to solve the problem or where to get the massive amounts of money needed to fix it, just another example of political paralysis in Washington.

Tens of millions of American cross over bridges every day without giving it much thought, unless they hit a pothole. But the infrastructure problem goes much deeper than pavement. It goes to crumbling concrete and corroded steel and the fact that nearly 70,000 bridges in America -- one out of every nine -- is now considered to be structurally deficient.

"You could go to any major city in America and see roads, and bridges, and infrastructure that need to be fixed today."

Ray LaHood: Our infrastructure is on life support right now. That's what we're on.

Few people are more aware of the situation than Ray LaHood, who was secretary of transportation during the first Obama administration, and before that a seven-term Republican congressman from Illinois. He is currently co-chairman of Building America's Future, a bipartisan coalition of current and former elected officials that is urgently pushing for more spending on infrastructure.

Steve Kroft: According to the government, there are 70,000 bridges that have been deemed structurally deficient.

Ray LaHood: Yep.

Steve Kroft: What does that mean?

Ray LaHood: It means that there are bridges that need to be really either replaced or repaired in a very dramatic way.

Steve Kroft: They're dangerous?

Ray LaHood: I don't want to say they're unsafe. But they're dangerous. I would agree with that.

Steve Kroft: If you were going to take me someplace, any place in the country, to illustrate the problem, where would you take me?

Ray LaHood: There is a lot of places we could go. You could go to any major city in America and see roads, and bridges, and infrastructure that need to be fixed today. They need to be fixed today.

THE POLITICS OF INFRASTRUCTURE

We decided to start in Pittsburgh, which may have the most serious problem in the country. Our guide was Andy Herrmann, a past president of the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Steve Kroft: From up here you can see why they call it the city of bridges.

Andy Herrmann: Yeah. Between the highway and the railroad bridges. There's many of them.

Steve Kroft: And most of them old.

Andy Herrmann: Most of them old. They're nearing the end of their useful lives, yeah.

There are more than more than 4,000 bridges in metropolitan Pittsburgh and 20 percent of them are structurally deficient, including one of the city's main arteries.

Steve Kroft: This is the Liberty Bridge ahead? An important bridge for Pittsburgh.

Andy Herrmann: A very important bridge for Pittsburgh. A connection from the south to the city itself, and then to the north.

It was built in 1928 when cars and trucks were much lighter. It was designed to last 50 years -- that was 86 years ago. Every day in Pittsburgh five million people travel across bridges that either need to be replaced or undergo major repairs.

Andy Herrmann: One of these arch bridges actually has a structure built under it to catch falling deck. See that structure underneath it? They actually built that to catch any of the falling concrete so it wouldn't hit traffic underneath it.

Steve Kroft: That's amazing.

Andy Herrmann: It all comes down to funding. Right now they can't keep up with it. Three hundred bridges become structurally deficient each year in the state of Pennsylvania. That's one percent added to the already 23 percent they already have. They just can't fix them fast enough.

Pennsylvania is one of the worst states in country when it comes to the condition of its infrastructure, and Philadelphia isn't any better off than Pittsburgh. Nine million people a day travel over 900 bridges classified as structurally deficient, some of them on a heavily traveled section of I-95. Ed Rendell is a former Democratic governor of Pennsylvania.

Steve Kroft: How critical is this stretch of I-95 to the country?

Ed Rendell: It's a nation's number one highway. Twenty-two miles of it goes through the city of Philadelphia. There are 15 structurally deficient bridges in that 22-mile stretch. And to fix them would cost seven billion dollars -- to fix all the roads and the structurally deficient bridges in that 22-mile stretch.

Rendell says no one knows where the money is going to come from and this stretch of I-95 has already had one brush with disaster. In 2008 two contractors from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation stopped to get a sausage sandwich, and parked their cars under this bridge.

Ed Rendell: And fortunately they wanted that sausage sandwich because they saw one of these piers with an eight foot gash in it about five inches wide. And oh, they knew automatically that this bridge was in deep trouble.

"Politicians in Washington don't have the political courage to say, 'This is what we have to do.'"

The section of I-95 was immediately shut down and blocked off while construction crews buttressed the column with steel girders. It was closed for three days, creating havoc in Philadelphia. But the city was lucky.

Ed Rendell: I mean, it was unbelievable. It's so fortuitous.

Steve Kroft: And if they hadn't wanted a sausage sandwich?

Ed Rendell: There's a strong likelihood that bridge would have collapsed. These all are tragedies waiting to happen.

The I-95 bridges were built in the early 1960s and are now more than 50 years old. The same vintage as the I-35 bridge that collapsed in Minnesota back in 2007, killing 13 people and injuring 145. The antiquated Skagit River Bridge in Washington state that collapsed last May after a truck hit one of the trusses was even older. And it's not just bridges. According to the

American Society of Civil Engineers, 32 percent of the major roads in America are now in poor condition and in need of major repairs. Yet the major source of revenue -- the federal Highway Trust Fund, which gets its money from the federal gas tax of 18 cents a gallon -- is almost insolvent. Former Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood says it will go broke by next spring unless something is done.

Ray LaHood: That's the pot of money that over 50 years helped us create the best interstate system in the world, which is now falling apart.

Steve Kroft: Why? How did it get this way?

Ray LaHood: It's falling apart because we haven't made the investments. We haven't got the money. The last time we raised the gas tax, which is how we built the interstate system, was 1993.

Steve Kroft: What has the resistance been?

Ray LaHood: Politicians in Washington don't have the political courage to say, "This is what we have to do." That's what it takes.

Steve Kroft: They don't want to spend the money? They don't want to raise the taxes?

Ray LaHood: That's right. They don't want to spend the money. They don't want to raise the taxes. They don't really have a vision of America the way that other Congresses have had a vision of America.

LaHood says public spending on infrastructure has fallen to its lowest level since 1947. And the U.S., which used to have the finest infrastructure in the world, is now ranked 16th according to the World Economic Forum, behind Iceland, Spain, Portugal and the United Arab Emirates. It's a fact that's not been lost the most powerful economic and political lobbies in the country who believe the inaction threatens the country's economic future. Big corporations like Caterpillar and GE say it's hurting their ability to compete abroad. And at a Senate hearing earlier this year Tom Donohue, president of the generally conservative U.S. Chamber of Commerce voiced strong business support for raising the gas tax for the first time in 20 years.

[Tom Donohue: First, let's start by having some courage, and showing some leadership. For once, let's do what's right, not what's politically expedient. Second, let's educate the public and your fellow lawmakers.]

He was joined by Richard Trumka, president of the AFL-CIO, who said that every billion dollars spent on transportation infrastructure would create 35,000 well-paying jobs.

[Richard Trumka: If business and labor can come before you united on this issue -- and we are united on this issue despite our sharp disagreements on a variety of other matters -- I think that should tell everybody something and tell it very loudly.]

But it was not heard during the midterm elections where there was virtually no public debate on infrastructure and that has barely changed in the weeks that have followed. We wanted to talk to Pennsylvania Congressman Bill Shuster, the chairman of the House Transportation Committee and made numerous requests over the last five months for an on-camera interview. All of them were declined. We did the same with Michigan Congressman Dave Camp, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, which has to come up with the money to fund transportation projects; we met with the same result. But we did talk with one of the committee members, Earl Blumenauer, a nine-term Oregon Democrat. He says the last time Congress passed a major six-year transportation bill was in 1997, since then there have been 21 short-term extensions.

"If Congress wants to do something now, build this bridge. It's ready to be done. It's been ready for two years."

Rep. Earl Blumenauer: I've actually been trying now for 44 months to at least get a hearing on transportation finance on the Highway Trust Fund that is slowly going bankrupt, and we've not had a single one.

Steve Kroft: Why can't you get a hearing?

Rep. Earl Blumenauer: It has, to this point, not raised to the level of priority for the Republican leadership. Although, in fairness, when the Democrats were in charge we had a few hearings, but not much action.

Steve Kroft: So you see this as a bipartisan failure.

Rep. Earl Blumenauer: Absolutely. The Bush administration, they had two blue ribbon commissions about infrastructure finance that recommended a lot more money, and additionally the gas tax being increased. We couldn't get them to accept being able to move forward. Since President Obama's been in office, there has been, to be charitable, a lack of enthusiasm for raising the gas tax.

And the problems with transportation infrastructure go well beyond roads and bridges and the gas tax. There's aviation. A shortage of airports runways and gates along outmoded air traffic control systems have made U.S. air travel the most congested in the world. And then there are seaports: when a new generation of big cargo ships begin going through an expanded Panama Canal in another year or so, only two of the 14 major ports on the East Coast will be dredged

deep enough to accommodate them. There are more than 14,000 miles of high-speed rail operating around the world, but none in the United States. In Chicago, it can take a freight train nearly as long to go across the city, as it would for the same train to go from Chicago to Los Angeles. But perhaps the most glaring example of neglect and inaction may be this sad little railroad bridge over the Hackensack River in New Jersey. It was built 104 years ago and is, according to Amtrak President and CEO Joe Boardman, critical to the U.S. economy.

Joe Boardman: This is the Achilles heel that we have on the Northeast Corridor.

Steve Kroft: How much traffic goes over it every day?

Joe Boardman: It's almost 500 trains a day. It's the busiest bridge in the Western Hemisphere for train traffic, period.

Steve Kroft: And what kind of shape is it in?

Joe Boardman: It's safe, Steve, but it's not reliable. And it's getting less reliable. It's old. Its systems are breaking down. There's an inability to make it work on a regular, reliable basis.

Boardman says the Portal Bridge is based on a design from the 1840s and was already obsolete shortly after it was completed in 1910. It's a swing bridge that needs to be opened several times a week so barges can pass up and down the river. It takes about a half an hour. The problem is it fails to lock back into place on a regular basis.

Steve Kroft: And what kind of problems does that cause?

Joe Boardman: It causes trains to stack up on both sides. And actually, when a train stacks up here, it can stack up all the way down to Washington and all the way back up to Boston. This is a single point of failure. That's one of the biggest worries we have on this corridor is these single points of failure.

COST OF SHUTTING DOWN THE PORTAL BRIDGE

Amtrak's president says the bridge has to be replaced, the design work has already been completed, and the project, which would cost just under a billion dollars, is shovel ready.

Joe Boardman: If Congress wants to do something now, build this bridge. It's ready to be done. It's been ready for two years. Build it. It's tangible evidence that they can really get something done.

It's less a case of wanting to get something done, than coming up with the hundreds of billions of dollars needed to do it. There is no shortage of ideas from Democrats or Republicans who've suggested everything from raising the gas tax to funding infrastructure through corporate tax

reform. But there is no consensus and not much political support for any of the alternatives as Andy Herrmann told us last summer, when we were flying over Pittsburgh.

Andy Herrmann: You're sitting there at these committee meetings; they seem to agree with you. Yes, we have to make investments in infrastructure. Yes, we have to do these things. But then they come around and say, "Well, where are we going to get the money?" And you sort of sit to yourself and say to yourself, "Well, we elected you to figure that out."

© 2014 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.