

We can't wait any longer to fix our nation's crumbling infrastructure

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The dire condition of our nation's infrastructure cannot be overstated. National media attention has pulled back the curtain on the mounting frustration and unsafe conditions Americans experience daily. Congested airports, collapsed dams, crumbling bridges, derailed trains, and outdated schools are quickly becoming the norm rather than the exception.

America's roads are crowded, underfunded, and often in poor condition, leading to a 7 percent increase in traffic fatalities from 2014 to 2015.

Additionally, four in 10 bridges are over 50 years old, and 9 percent of them are considered structurally deficient. The rest of our infrastructure presents just as grim a picture.

Seven hundred times a day, a water main breaks somewhere in the United States, and we are falling behind in providing broadband capability in many parts of the country. In fact, 39 percent of the rural population — 23.4 million Americans — lack access to what the Federal Communications Commission regards as basic fixed broadband service, affecting the ability of small businesses operating in rural areas to successfully compete.

These appalling statistics, coupled with our government's failure to act, led the American Society of Civil Engineers to assign a D+ grade to the overall U.S. infrastructure in its 2017 report card. Unfortunately, the stories match the statistics, and infrastructure failures continue to paralyze our communities.

The recent collapse of the Oroville Dam in California — one of more than 4,000 dams deemed unsafe — showed that deteriorating infrastructure can quickly become a devastating crisis if it is not maintained and modernized. In Atlanta, a massive fire on I-85 North caused a portion of a bridge to collapse in March, and less than 30 days later, I-20 West buckled during traffic. And in New York, a train jumping the tracks at Penn Station delayed hundreds of thousands of commuters just last month, disrupting train service from Boston to Washington, D.C., and delaying commuter trains in the region for nearly a week.

Our children and teachers are suffering too, forced to travel on crumbling bridges and unsafe roads and spend hours in traffic just to get to overcrowded and neglected schools. We're sending a message that America doesn't care about them and that education isn't a priority. In Ohio, for instance, one school district had to change school bus routes to avoid potholes, leading to a fourth-grader dangerously walking along a street without sidewalks to reach her new bus stop.

Infrastructure investment and development continues to be one of the most popular legislative issues, with leaders of both political parties claiming they're willing to compromise and work together. But despite the urgent calls for action, there's been no real movement. States have been creative, out of necessity, taking advantage of competitive discretionary grants and choosing to approve gas tax increases. In fact, 22 states have passed laws imposing

higher gas taxes in the past five years. In the 2016 election, 70 percent of the local ballot initiatives that sought to increase funding for transportation were approved.

Our leaders must stop thinking in the short term, and instead begin to look for solutions that help generate a stream of revenue that can finance long-term infrastructure plans. Our roads and bridges are collapsing, we are underfunding our water resources, and our schools leave much to be desired. Repatriation and other temporary solutions are no longer enough. This is a bipartisan issue that policymakers must prioritize. We need them to increase the funding for projects that already work and promote innovation, and we need them to establish a national infrastructure bank that will attract private investment.

Recognizing the need for high-skilled workers to design and maintain future infrastructure projects, the American Federation of Teachers and building trade unions are ready and willing to train high school students in career and technical education programs. One example that's already showing great promise is Transit Tech High School in New York City, where students are trained to maintain modern railcars and work in transit electronics, computer engineering and cybersecurity. Seniors get real-world internships that can lead to high-paying jobs and help stimulate the economy. It's a win-win.

The economic competitiveness of U.S. infrastructure used to rank No. 1, according to the World Economic Forum. A decade later, we rank No. 11. Our infrastructure is collapsing, and our citizens are suffering. We claim to be a leader in the world, but our own cities are falling apart. It is time we start prioritizing infrastructure and approve long-term infrastructure investment that offers economic benefits, increases public safety and improves our quality of life. Future generations are counting on us.

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