



Letter to the Editor: What is infrastructure?

by J. David Parker
July 16 2018 3:55 PM

The time honored and trustworthy Miriam Webster Dictionary defines the word infrastructure as a noun, the following is one of three definitions “the system of public works of a country, state, or region; also : the resources (such as personnel, buildings, or equipment) required for an activity.”

A few examples of infrastructure include the roads we drive on, our plumbing and sewage systems and our electrical grid. Things we pay for collectively as citizens, residents and occasionally as consumers via taxes and utility bills. Lately we have heard the infrastructure alongside some very unpleasant descriptors such as: crumbling, failing, and outdated.

I will be focusing on infrastructure within the State of Illinois. Yearly, the American Society of Civil Engineers offers state-by-state Infrastructure Report Cards. The 2018 Illinois Report Card overall, scores as C-

Our infrastructure mostly goes unnoticed in our daily lives. We tend to take it for granted. We literally could not leave our houses or hope to survive for very long or very well within our homes without it.

The condition of our infrastructure has a very real impact on every person and business. We all depend on roads and bridges, water to our taps, and a system of inland waterways, ports, rail and transit to move goods and people. Historically, Illinois has enjoyed an advantage of being at the centers of the country’s rail, air, roadway and waterway systems. In years past, sizable investments were made in our state's infrastructure to seize upon these advantages and Illinois’ economy greatly prospered due to a progressive attitude and deliberate trajectory toward infrastructure investment.

In recent years, and arguably decades, this trend of progressive reversed course. Underinvestment and in some cases, zero investment in infrastructure threatens our economy, health, and safety of the residents of our great state. The ASCE Report Card is an easy to understand tool created to help Illinois understand the condition of our state's infrastructure. We are barely passing. If Illinois were a college student, the student would be receiving warnings of near-failing grades commonly known on college campuses as “down slips”. The rationale of the grading system is simple and straight forward:

A= EXCEPTIONAL

B= GOOD

C= MEDIOCRE

D= POOR

F= FAILING

Illinois Infrastructure Grades according to ASCE are as follows:

AVIATION: C+

BRIDGES: C

DAMS: C

DRINKING WATER: C-

NAVIGABLE WATERWAYS: D-

PORTS: C-

RAIL: C+

ROADS: D

TRANSIT: D

WASTEWATER: C-

According to The Association of Civil Engineers, “each category was evaluated on the basis of capacity, condition, funding, future need, operation and maintenance, public safety, resilience, and innovation.”

Aviation includes 87 public-use airports. 2,243 (8.40%) of Illinois’ 26,704 bridges were found structurally deficient. 87% of the state regulated dams have an Emergency Action Plan with 224 dams classified as high hazard dams. An estimated needed investment of \$6.5 billion in drinking water infrastructure needs over the next 20 years.

Illinois generated 308.7 Trillion BTU of renewable energy every year, ranking it 8th. Hazardous Waste includes 45 sites on the National Priorities List. Illinois has 1,100 miles of inland waterways, ranking it 8th. 1,701 miles of levees 106.5 million short tons of cargo passed through Illinois Ports in 2012, ranking it 6th nationally. An estimated

\$669.38 million worth of unmet needs for our state's parks system 6,986 miles of freight railroads across the state, ranking 2nd nationally .

Illinois boasts 145,840 miles of Public Roads, with 18% in poor condition. Costing \$566 per motorist per year in costs from driving on roads in need of repair. A staggering \$862 million gap in estimated school capital expenditures. It's anyone's guess what is an accurate dollar figure for how much money Illinois Teachers spend out of their own pockets for basic classroom supplies but I'd dare to guess that the state-wide cumulative amount is staggering.

Illinois logged 664,675,286 annual unlinked passenger trips via transit systems including bus, transit, and commuter trains. An estimated \$6.53 billion in wastewater infrastructure is needed over the next 20 years. Illinois' infrastructure problems are solvable, but, we can no longer have the luxury of time to delay investment in our infrastructure systems.

Collectively, as the people of Illinois need to demand that our next governor be they Democrat or Republican and our next State Legislature, regardless of either party's majority within it; make infrastructure investment a top priority. This is a very important question to ask of the candidates vying to represent us. Our very lives and livelihoods as the people of Illinois depend on their commitment to investment in and improvement in our state's infrastructure starting immediately.

Illinois, as your professor, I'm sorry to break this to you, but you are in serious danger of failing this semester in your Infrastructure 101 class.

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