



Hundreds of bridges await repair in Mass.

By Jay Lindsay
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BOSTON (AP) -- An aggressive, multibillion-dollar bridge repair program has helped Massachusetts significantly reduce its number of bridges with structural problems, but hundreds are still awaiting repair.

Meanwhile, several dozen of those bridges are also deemed "fracture critical," or at risk of collapse if a single, vital component fails, according to an Associated Press review of national bridge records.

State Highway Administrator Frank DePaola said the state is moving to make repairs as quickly as funds allow. Until then, rigorous inspection, interim repairs and steps to protect vulnerable bridge components -- such as using barriers to shield them from cars -- ensure all the flagged bridges are safe for travel, he said.

"We have a term for unsafe bridges, and that is 'closed,'" DePaola said.

The AP analysis of the most recently available federal government data indicates that nationally there are 20,808 fracture critical bridges and 65,605 "structurally deficient" bridges. A structurally deficient bridge has problems with a major component, such as advanced deterioration, and needs rehabilitation or replacement.

Structurally deficit bridges make up about 11 percent of the 607,380 bridges in the National Bridge Inventory.

Massachusetts had roughly the same percentage of structurally deficient bridges in 2008, when the state began an eight-year, \$3 billion Accelerated Bridge Program to cut into its backlog of bridges in need of repair and replacement.

The state has since reduced the number of structurally deficient bridge from 543 to 463, or about 9 percent of the state's 5,127 bridges, DePaola said.

Of the deficient Massachusetts bridges, 97 are also labeled "fracture critical." But DePaola said about two-thirds of those bridges are either being repaired, or the review and permitting process to repair them has started. That leaves roughly a third "waiting for us to have enough funds to replace them."

The double-flagged bridges are located around the state, from a ramp onto busy Storrow Drive toward Boston to a span over the Westfield River, near the western Massachusetts towns of Middlefield and Worthington.

Annual funding from the state's Accelerated Bridges Program far exceeds the roughly \$150 million DePaola estimated Massachusetts receives annually in federal funding for bridges. Kristina Egan, director of Transportation for Massachusetts, a privately funded transportation improvement advocacy group, said state legislators must find more money to continue what she said has been good work.

"We still have a long way to go," Egan said.

Egan said the state bridge program has efficiently stretched the dollars it has, citing its "Fast 14" project in June and August 2011, which replaced 14 bridges on Route 93 near Boston in 10 weekends. State transportation officials estimated the work would normally take at least four years, but the state dramatically cut down that time by, for instance, relying heavily on prefabricated parts.

That kind of innovation can't continue without money, and neither can the critical repairs, Egan said. She noted hundreds of millions in repairs are needed on a span that takes Interstate 91 through Springfield, but there isn't a dollar designated to it yet, though that highway is critical to local commerce.

"That's a concrete example of why we need the funds, for safety, and for the economy," she said.