

Rhode Island Department of Transportation



RhodeWorks: Op-Eds

Table of Contents

Op-Ed: Fix R.I. roads and bridges now 2
 Providence Journal – September 7, 2015
 By Louis P. DiPalma

Op-Ed: Roads and bridges are not free..... 4
 Providence Journal – June 26, 2015
 By Rick Wilson

Op-Ed: Crucial for R.I. to fix bridges..... 6
 Providence Journal – June 24, 2015
 By Ed Rendell

Op-Ed Stop delaying; fix R.I. bridges 8
 Providence Journal – June 19, 2015
 By Abel Collins

Op-Ed: Fix R.I. roads and bridges now

Providence Journal – September 7, 2015

By Louis P. DiPalma

The U.S. Department of Transportation ranks Rhode Island last -- 50th out of 50 states -- in bridge quality. Everyone agrees that we have to fix the bridges across Rhode Island, approximately one in every five of which are structurally deficient (that is 20 percent). This represents more than 150 bridges that require immediate attention.

We have felt the consequences recently with closures or restrictions on the Pawtucket River Bridge, the Sakonnet River Bridge, the Portsmouth Escape Bridge, and the Cranston Park Avenue Bridge, to name a few. The time to act is now. The problems will get worse if they are not addressed, and the longer we wait the more costly it becomes. The open question is how best to address tackling this critically important challenge. It is an issue of safety, transportation and economics.

We have taken steps in recent years to address funding challenges and to work toward getting our state's transportation-infrastructure house in order. With the 2015 fiscal year budget, we provided additional funding for the Rhode Island Highway Maintenance Account.

Over a period of the next three years, all license and vehicle registration fees paid to the state Division of Motor Vehicles will be transferred into this account, significantly enhancing our pay-as-you-go approach. This and other changes are expected to yield an additional \$50 million in infrastructure resources annually to the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) by 2019. Over the course of 10 years, it would provide more than \$500 million to RIDOT. While this is good, much more needs to be done to take on our enormous funding challenge.

I applaud Governor Raimondo and RIDOT, especially Director Peter Alviti and Deputy Director Peter Garino, for the bold initiative they have put forward to solve this pressing issue. The executive branch, working in collaboration with the legislature, has heard, listened and acted. The current legislation (S0997 Sub A) includes many changes that resulted from the hearings conducted by both the Senate and House committees on finance.

Improvements in the current RhodeWorks legislation include a rebate/credit program for Rhode Island trucking companies, a reduction in borrowing, a provision to prepay the bond early, a limit on the maximum daily toll per vehicle, removal of Class 6 and 7 trucks from the proposal, and no impact on the state's general fund.

Some have argued that we should do this work "pay-as-you-go" instead of through a bond. A pay-as-you-go approach is problematic because it would end up costing more, and would further exacerbate our future structural deficits.

The bottom line is that large commercial trucks are causing the majority of the vehicle-caused damage to our highways. The Government Accountability Office's report from back in July 1979, "Excessive Truck Weight: An Expensive Burden We Can No Longer Support," reveals that a typical 80,000-pound tractor-trailer has the same impact on an interstate highway as at least 9,600 automobiles.

Shouldn't the operators of these vehicles pay their fair share? And, shouldn't the operators of those out-of-state vehicles that are wearing down our roads pay their fair share as well? This is especially true considering the fact that commercial trucks are paying user fees in almost every other Northeastern state. We do collect our apportioned share from the International Fuel Tax Agreement, but that doesn't go nearly far enough to address the impact of the associated vehicles.

It is imperative that we move forward with this vetted, holistic and comprehensive RhodeWorks proposal. The plan seeks to achieve 90 percent structurally sufficient bridges by 2025. Additionally, Rhode Island will be more attractive to businesses and will create about 11,000 job-years over the next decade. Delays in addressing the aforementioned challenge will continue to affect safety, transportation and the economy. We cannot afford to wait. The time to act is now!

Louis P. DiPalma is a Democratic state senator from Middletown. He is first vice chair of the Senate Finance Committee.

Op-Ed: Roads and bridges are not free

Providence Journal – June 26, 2015

By Rick Wilson

Good roads and bridges cost money. That is an undisputable fact that many Rhode Islanders seem unable to grasp. Everyone recognizes the problem but wants someone else to pay.

Gov. Gina Raimondo has proposed tolls on trucking that are long overdue. The General Assembly has continually given lip service to the problem but taken little action. It even lacked the courage to place a toll on the new Sakonnet Bridge for all vehicles when it is clear the Bridge Authority will need the money to maintain not only that bridge but all of the bridges connecting Newport and Jamestown to the rest of Rhode Island.

Unfortunately, all of the money from licenses, registrations and even our gasoline tax goes into the general fund instead of being applied to maintaining our roads and bridges. In the vast majority of states, those funds are dedicated to transportation.

The legislature's stranglehold on the general fund predetermines that Rhode Island will continue to be first in welfare benefits and last in infrastructure. Roads and bridges don't vote.

Consequently, the Rhode Island Department of Transportation is being forced to slap Band-Aids on wounds that need critical care. We patch the same potholes and seal the same cracks every year instead of fixing the road bed itself. This guarantees that the problem will never be resolved.

My wife, Nancy, and I just returned from a trip to Wyoming, where my oldest son was married. Instead of flying we decided to take a road trip and see sites like Niagara Falls, Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Chicago, Bad Lands, Black Hills, Mount Rushmore, Teton National Park, Yellowstone and the rest of Wyoming. We went out on Route 90 and returned on Route 80.

Two pertinent facts stood out on our 6,000-mile journey. The first was that there is a huge amount of road and bridge construction going on in the rest of the country. The second was that you really need an E-ZPass, because those states are paying for that construction with tolls.

In states and cities where they get far more snow and freezing temperatures than Rhode Island, the roads were free of potholes and seam sealing. Speed limits varied from 65 to 80 mph on roads that were amazingly good despite the heavy truck traffic. The trucks, however, were paying for those good roads with weighing stations and fees. Clearly Rhode Island is doing something wrong.

Our bridges have been acknowledged to be the worst in the country. Is the legislature going to wait until there is a catastrophic failure before it acts? Do people have to die to finally get the legislature on board? Perhaps a trip downtown from Smith Hill to visit the bridges on Route 95 might enlighten them.

It is time to stop kicking the proverbial can down the road and fix the road. A good first step would be imposing tolls on the trucks, but a better step would be taking all of the driving-related funds out of the general fund and putting them where they belong. We already have paid for the equipment to put a toll at the Sakonnet River Bridge. Go ahead and do the right thing for a change: charge the people who use it and stop the free lunch.

The longer we delay addressing the problem, the more it is going to cost. The end result is similar to our current pension problem: There is no easy solution, just a lot of collective pain that could have been avoided.

Governor Raimondo, fortunately, recognizes the problem and has proposed a reasonable approach. The legislature heard her on pensions. Perhaps it finally will on bridges and roads.

In case you are wondering, I can confirm the fact that we do have the worst bridges and roads in the country. When I hit the Massachusetts line, the road immediately improved.

Op-Ed: Crucial for R.I. to fix bridges

Providence Journal – June 24, 2015

By Ed Rendell

As a former two-term mayor of Philadelphia and two-term governor of Pennsylvania, I'm keenly aware of the challenges cities and states face in rebuilding their roads and bridges.

In 2008, during my second term as governor, two contractors from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation stopped to get a sausage sandwich; they parked their cars under a bridge along Route 95 in Philadelphia.

It's lucky they wanted that sausage sandwich because they saw one of the piers had a gash about eight feet long and five inches wide. The contractors knew right then that the bridge was in deep trouble.

The section of Route 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: if those contractors hadn't stopped, there's a strong likelihood that bridge would have collapsed. You can't help but think of the Route 35 bridge that collapsed in Minnesota in 2007, killing 13 people and injuring many more.

Across the country, America is suffering from dilapidated and crumbling infrastructure. But few states have issues as serious as Rhode Island. In a recent study by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Rhode Island ranked 45th in road quality, and dead last — 50th out of 50 states — in bridge quality.

The problem is simple: we are not investing enough to maintain, rebuild, and modernize our infrastructure. The problem isn't going to fix itself; in fact, the longer we wait, the more expensive it will be to address it. We need our elected officials to step up and offer solutions. We need leadership.

That's why I'm so impressed with Gov. Gina Raimondo's RhodeWorks proposal. Here's a new governor who identified the problem, analyzed it, and offered a bold solution to address it. Her proposal would invest approximately \$1 billion in additional money over the next 10 years to modernize Rhode Island's highway bridges. It would generate much of the money by assessing a user fee on large commercial trucks.

Her plan makes sense for several reasons. First, virtually every state on the Route 95 corridor from Maryland to Maine assesses user fees on large commercial trucks. (Large commercial trucks are paying \$114 to cross the George Washington Bridge in New York.) Why should Rhode Island continue to be an outlier when its roads and bridges are among the worst?

Second, study after study shows that large commercial trucks are responsible for the vast majority of vehicle-created damage to roads and bridges, yet commercial trucks pay only a fraction of the cost to

repair them. It's only fair to make them pay a little more — especially since they're already paying these fees in so many other states.

Third, her plan will create jobs. Rhode Island's unemployment rate is still among the worst in the country, and the state has suffered, especially from a shortage of construction jobs. The governor's plan would not only improve roads and bridges, but create thousands of jobs and provide a strong boost to the state's economy.

And finally, it's good for business. One of the key ingredients companies look at when deciding where to locate is the quality of infrastructure. If Rhode Island wants to attract more companies to invest and create jobs, it has to improve the quality of its infrastructure.

It's no surprise that some in the trucking industry are complaining. Truckers claim to want to rebuild our roads, but their solution is to hike the gas tax or to impose tolls on everyone. Governor Raimondo's plan makes sense: trucks cause a majority of the damage, it's only fair if they pay a little more of the cost of repair.

The longer the state waits, the more expensive it will become, because materials become more expensive and more bridges fall into disrepair.

America needs leadership to rebuild our crumbling infrastructure. Your governor is providing that leadership right here in Rhode Island. You have a chance to make real progress, address a serious problem and put thousands of people to work. I hope you act without delay.

Op-Ed Stop delaying; fix R.I. bridges

Providence Journal – June 19, 2015

By Abel Collins

On Aug. 1, 2007, the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed, killing 13 people. At the time of the tragedy, Minnesota's roads and bridges were ranked as the 15th best in the country.

Rhode Islanders would be wise to take heed. Currently, we have the oldest transportation infrastructure in the United States, and its condition is ranked last. If we remain on our present trajectory, the number of structurally deficient bridges in Rhode will double from roughly 20 percent to 40 percent over the next decade.

We are all familiar with these bridges, some of which have reinforcing bars protruding from the supports. The situation is dire and deteriorating, and unless we change course, we are inviting disaster.

Is there a higher priority than public safety for policy makers? As a town council president, I can't think of one. We must call on the General Assembly to address our crumbling infrastructure before someone gets hurt.

Fortunately, Gov. Gina Raimondo's plan to create the Rhode Island Bridge Replacement and Maintenance Fund would give the Rhode Island Department of Transportation (RIDOT) the means to reverse the trend by implementing her bold 10-year transportation program, RhodeWorks.

If the moral imperative to protect public safety is not enough to move legislators to pass this sensible legislation, perhaps it helps to remember that RhodeWorks would also make Rhode Island more economically competitive and environmentally sound.

It would mean thousands of good-paying construction jobs, improved bridges, roads and transit that welcome and facilitate commerce, plus savings on our vehicle maintenance bills. Moreover, the proposed program would ease congestion on our roads, reducing the wasted time in traffic snarls, and reducing carbon pollution as well as toxic emissions that exacerbate pulmonary conditions such as asthma.

It's a commitment to modernizing Rhode Island's transportation system, an effort that will draw young people and businesses to the state. RhodeWorks isn't just the right thing to do; it's a no-brainer.

So what's stopping us? Simply put, the trucking industry. Heavy trucks cause most of the damage to our bridges and roads, and Rhodeworks creates a more equitable financing model to address Rhode Island's dilapidated infrastructure by tolling tractor trailer trucks to pay for the wear and tear they cause. The tolls would leverage and pay off the revenue bonds that will support bridge repairs.

RIDOT estimates that heavy trucks pay for less than 20 percent of statewide transportation infrastructure costs. While the trucking industry has hired lobbyists to convince lawmakers that it is unfair, the proposed tolling would raise the percentage to just somewhere in the mid-30s. In other words, even with the tolls, the public would still be donating a large hidden subsidy to the trucking industry. At least RhodeWorks would be more fair. In fact, tolling big trucks would also bring Rhode Island closer to what other nearby states do to finance their infrastructure needs.

Admittedly, the RhodeWorks proposal was introduced late in the legislative session, as it took some time to install a new leadership team at the Department of Transportation. Nevertheless, RhodeWorks is a solid plan that would make Rhode Island safer, cleaner, and more prosperous. Better yet, it does this fairly and it is a proven model.

The benefits of the proposal to the public and the business community outweigh the selfish interests of the trucking industry. Yet the Rhode Island House Finance Committee cut the proposal out of the budget last week, and it looks as if another good idea to meet an urgent public need will be stalled by special interests.

Don't let it happen. We are all tired of complaining about how awful our roads are. We do not need to accept our place at the bottom of the list, so let's not wait any longer to start doing something about it. Tell your legislators that it's time to fix our bridges and roads and build a better transportation system. Let's be bold and responsible.