

Why Are We Letting Our Infrastructure Fall to Pieces?

The troubles of Washington's Metro system are emblematic. It's going to cost us a lot not to fix the systems we rely on.

BY [RAY LAHOOD](#) | APRIL 11, 2016

I'll admit it: I was shocked when I read that the Washington, D.C., region's Metro rail system might be facing line closures for up to six months at a time to make critical, long-neglected safety repairs. Fortunately, Metro has since walked that idea back. But just the prospect of a major transit system having to take such a drastic step is emblematic of what can happen when critical maintenance is put off and investment in our public infrastructure does not keep pace with needs.

In the last 12 months, broken dams in South Carolina caused flooding and fatalities; a massive gas-leak in Los Angeles sickened and displaced thousands of families; and, of course, residents of Flint, Mich., found out that their fears about toxic water were not unfounded - unsafe lead levels may have harmed Flint children for the rest of their lives.

Our nation's refusal to face facts and take care of our roads, rails, bridges and pipelines has very real consequences, both for public safety and for our economy. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, the cost of not fixing our infrastructure could lead to a \$3.1 trillion loss in GDP by 2020. The American Water Works Association estimates that it will cost more than \$1 trillion to replace aging water pipes in the ground, and that figure doesn't even account for necessary upgrades to drinking-water or wastewater-treatment plants.

I applaud Metro for its new prioritization of safety and for being very public about just how critical the situation is. We should not forget that it was just last year, in a total safety breakdown, that one person died and 70 other Metro passengers were injured when smoke from an electrical malfunction filled a rail car in a downtown tunnel. It shouldn't take a fatality or injuries to set off alarm bells that years of deferred maintenance has led to systemic lapses.

Until just recently, Metro was one of the premier transit systems in America. It is truly America's subway, carrying both residents of and visitors to our nation's capital. Ironically, the deficiencies and breakdowns have mirrored the inaction in Washington in recent years when it comes to robust investment in our nation's infrastructure. Government at all levels must up their game and adequately invest to ensure the safety and reliability of our critical transportation assets.

Neglect of these systems comes with a steep price tag. Metro is asking for more than \$1 billion a year of additional funding to make necessary repairs. It is difficult to put a number on the cost of commuter time lost in delays while a subpar system limps along or massive gridlock occurs aboveground if the entire system is shut down for a period of time.

Unfortunately, these types of drastic actions -- shutting down parts of a transportation system to conduct large-scale maintenance projects -- are not unprecedented. Chicago recently shut down miles of track to get ahead of chronic delays, and Baltimore is planning similar action this summer. The Bay Area Rapid Transit system in San Francisco recently told its riders that delays and maintenance issues are "our new reality."

In just a few months, Americans from all over our country will descend upon Washington to inaugurate a new president. Visitors from around the world were recently riding Metro to see the cherry blossoms. School trips to Washington to visit Congress and the monuments are a rite of passage for many American children. When visitors step onto Metro, they shouldn't have to worry about whether they will survive the trip.

Fundamentally, leaders at every level have a responsibility to their constituents and their customers to put safety first, whether that means safety in transportation or safety in drinking water. Days and months of deferred maintenance have turned into years and decades of kicking the can down the road. The trains are stranded at the station. The bill for all of that is coming due, and we need to prepare ourselves: it is going to be more painful, more inconvenient, and more expensive, before it gets better.