

Spending Freeze Deals Another Blow to Ailing Roads and Bridges

by David King

Monday, April 19, 2010 12:00 AM



Repairs to the Alexander Hamilton Bridge in the Bronx could come to a halt if the state does not resume payments to the contractor doing the work.

You may have noticed some changes while driving out of the city Friday evening: major repairs once fully underway on that cracked and crumbling bridge have stopped. The previously omnipresent hardhats with orange vests were missing from major roadways.

Where did they go?

Late last month, in response to the budget crisis, Gov. [David Paterson](#) halted payments on state-funded construction projects already underway or soon to be started. Work deemed to be of an emergency nature or funded by federal stimulus funds will continue.

Paterson's move has forced contractors to evaluate whether they can continue their projects without payment from the state or will have to shut down and lay off hundreds of workers. On

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Friday, a number of trade associations [filed a lawsuit](#) in Albany Supreme Court in an attempt to force Paterson to pay up.

The contractor who is in charge of the repairs to the Alexander Hamilton Bridge, for example, [told the New York Post](#) on April 2 that he would have to begin shutting down the project if the state did not reestablish funding. The company did not return calls for comment on this story. Other major projects in the five boroughs that could be in jeopardy include bridge and roadwork on the Nassau Expressway in Queens and repairs to the Gowanus Expressway in Brooklyn.

The funding situation has created an immediate crisis, but New York's transportation infrastructure did not become decrepit overnight. (*For a look at some of New York City's decaying streets, see Gotham Gazette's slide show, [Rough Roads](#)*

) For years legislators and the governor have raided the fund set aside to repair [State Department of Transportation](#) owned roads and bridges. Now, with a \$9 billion dollar deficit to deal with and an even darker financial picture looming in the near future, the state says it does not have enough money to fund the five-year road and bridge plan.

No Extension

The budget is now more than two weeks late and the legislature has passed two bare-bones budget extenders to keep state government running. When the Senate went to vote on the second extender last week, upstate Republican Sen. [John DeFrancisco](#) tried to introduce an amendment that would have added emergency funding for construction projects.

Sen. [Martin Dilan](#), the chair of the Senate Transportation Committee, told the chamber he agreed with the idea of the bill and had sent a letter to the governor's budget director requesting that funding for the transportation projects be made part of any future budget extenders. (To read Dilan's letter, go [here](#).) But Dilan said he would not vote for DeFrancisco's amendment because the Assembly had already passed its extender without it.

"I understand Sen. Dilan's position," DeFrancisco told the Senate, "but I think there comes a point in time where we really truly ought to fight in the forum where we have some power, rather than hoping on the good will of the administration." Passing the amendment, he said, would send

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a message to the governor that "this is really important not just for public safety, but to keep people employed."

DeFrancisco feels that upstate is in particular being hung out to dry because the state has not come up with a long-term road and bridge plan. He said that the legislature has "bailed out the MTA" but has not provided more money to fix upstate transportation woes.

DeFrancisco's amendment was defeated. Republican Sen. [Tom Libous](#) sharply criticized the decision not to include construction projects. (For his written statement and a link to a video, go [here](#) .)

The defeat and the budget delay have put a number of projects in limbo. Some construction firms say they are obligated by their contracts to meet certain deadlines whether or not the state pays them. Some have already completed the work.

"I talked to a contractor in Syracuse who finished the work on a project, but he hasn't been paid," said DeFrancisco. He added the delay was "simply a tactic" by the governor "to get the assembly and senate to pass his budget."

Meanwhile, industry representatives say the delayed payments will cost New York State jobs as well as create headaches, if not outright danger, for motorists.

Felice Farber of the [General Contractors Association of New York](#) said the latest budget maneuvering is part of a continuing problem: New York's long-standing neglect of its infrastructure. "The real issue is, New York has an enormous infrastructure, roads and bridges that need real maintenance. Lots of these projects have taken a long time to plan," Farber said. "The longer it takes to get started, the longer it will take to complete the projects and the more will have to be spent on maintenance because they don't have the money to pay for rehabilitation."

From Bad to Worse

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In other words, you may not be imagining things if you think you notice more cracks in the pavement, falling debris, or jutting metal plates covering the road while driving the kids to Coney Island. It isn't a mirage when you see water through cracks in the bridge roadbed.

Recent studies show that New York's roads and bridges are falling into a state of disrepair and putting drivers in danger. State funds from gas, motor vehicle and highway taxes that are designated for road maintenance and rehabilitation have been raided over and over again to fill budget gaps. As a result, with each passing year roads and bridges overseen by the state become more worn and increasingly costly to repair. Rather than making the big expenditures needed to completely rehabilitate an ailing bridge, the state spends just enough money to keep the bridges and roads passable. Meanwhile cars and trucks jam old roads and bridges that were not designed for current levels of traffic, exacerbating traffic problems and leading to delays and accidents.

A January 2010 the [study](#) by [TRIP](#), a national transportation research group, found that the state now spends considerably less on road maintenance than it once did. Half of the revenue received by the [New York State Highway and Bridge Dedicated Trust Fund](#) goes to pay off debt. Debt service is expected to take over 75 percent of the fund's incoming revenues by 2013.

From fiscal years 1993-1994 to 2008-2009 a little over one third of expenditures from the New York State Highway Bridge Dedicated Trust Fund went toward improving roads and bridges. It is expected that by 2013 only 21 percent of expenditures from the trust fund will be spent on road and bridge maintenance. An analysis of New York's 20-year transportation needs show the state would require about \$175 billion from 2010 to 2030 to maintain its transportation infrastructure. Revenue estimates show the state will likely be \$87 billion short of that goal.

Another [study](#), this one by state Comptroller [Tom DiNapoli](#) released this past fall, found that only 35 percent of the funds from the Highway and Bridge Dedicated Trust Fund have been directed to improving infrastructure since the fund was created in 1991. The rest funded the state Department of Transportation and the Department of Motor Vehicles, and paid off debt. DiNapoli's office estimates that "\$3.9 billion will need to be transferred from the state's General Fund to the Highway and Bridge Trust Fund over the next five years to meet the Trust Fund's obligations."

"It was poor fiscal management that led to the projects' fund dwindling," said Graham Parker in

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Dilan's office. "It was raided to push budget gaps, and suddenly now it just caved in on itself."

And that is not good news for New Yorkers. The Department of Transportation is not in charge of all of New York's roads -- the city is responsible for typical city streets such as the one where Mayor Michael Bloomberg [filled](#) what he said was the 2 millionth pothole. The state does, though, oversee parts of major highways, expressways and bridges, such as Interstates 495, 87, 95 and 278.

Who is in charge of which roads is broken down by the terms "built" and "unbuilt." [According to the state Department of Transportation website](#), "In NYC there are currently approximately 155 miles of built (state owned) arterials and 95 miles of unbuilt (city owned) arterials." The highway law states that the state will take over roads from the city as they are reconstructed to meet current standards. The state is slowly taking over responsibility for more portions of road around the five boroughs.

The Cost of Delay

The delayed maintenance and canceled projects have taken their toll. According to the TRIP report, 22 percent of New York State's major roads, including highways, arterials and freeways, have been rated in poor condition. Twenty-four percent of them are in mediocre condition. Those conditions lead to damage to vehicles, increased fuel consumption and wear on tires. That translates into every motorist spending an extra \$405 annually to operate a vehicle. In total, New York's motorists are paying \$4.5 billion more each year due to poor road conditions, the report says.

More than 100 bridges across New York state, according to DiNapoli's audit, have been ranked as being less safe than the Crown Point bridge in upstate, which was demolished last year.

Dangerous Crossings

Last year, the General Contractor's Association released a list of what it said are the 10 worst state-owned bridges and elevated roadways in New York City. Here they are:

1. Kosciuszko Bridge
2. Gowanus Expressway
3. Bronx River Parkway over train track
4. Cross Bronx Expressway Viaduct over Amtrak and the Sheridan Expressway
5. Bronx Terminal Viaduct Carrying the Major Deegan by Yankee Stadium

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6. Major Deegan Expressway over Sedgewick Avenue & Metro-North Railroad
7. Bruckner Expressway Service Road Northbound
8. Bruckner Boulevard Viaduct
9. 150th Street Over Belt Parkway
10. Major Deegan Ramp to 153rd Street/Cromwell Avenue (southbound)

The General Contractors Association of New York released a top ten list last year (see box). Most of the bridges on the list are located in the Bronx.

The top offender, the 70-year-old Kosciuscko Bridge, which notoriously creates bottlenecks on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway, is [scheduled to be replaced](#). New Yorkers spend hours on the bridge waiting in traffic jams, staring at potholes and other suspicious looking construction flaws. Some 170,000 vehicles traverse the span each day, and the accident rate on the bridge is four times greater than on other bridges around the state.

The state's inability to find funding for road projects has extended the time it will take to replace the bridge and increased the cost of the endeavor. "The cost of the Kosciuscko Bridge went from \$750 million to a billion. And most of the project has been broken up into pieces," says Farber.

Talk about replacing the bridge began in 2002, and the project has been in various stages on and off since then. A number of different bridge designs have been proposed .

The transportation department says that replacing the bridge will begin in 2014. "That bridge has so much daily use, it's really up there in cost for a bridge like that not to be maintained," said Parker. "There needs to be money for maintenance so that projects don't get to this point. We need to get back to maintaining."

The Tappan Zee Bridge, a familiar span of concrete and steel for those who venture upstate across Interstate 87, creates fear among many who drive across it on a regular basis. The American Automobile Association deemed it one of the ["Worst Bridges in New York"](#) along with, you guessed it, the Kosciuscko Bridge. The Tappan Zee has been rated structurally deficient by numerous studies including a 2006 National Bridge Inventory by the National Highway Administration. One motorist

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[told the Poughkeepsie Journal](#)

that she keeps a tool in her car to bash out her windows so that she can escape should the bridge collapse.

The Tappan Zee is riddled with cracks in columns and corrosion in its drainage system. The very material it was constructed with during the 1950s is substandard since better metals at the time were being appropriated for the Korean War effort. The structure is under perpetual repair and at the same time it bears 40 percent more traffic every day than it was designed to take. When it was first constructed the bridge carried around 18,000 vehicles a day; now traffic can exceed 170,000 vehicles a day.

Experts say the entire bridge needs to be replaced. The state is currently in the midst of replacing the bridge's deck and has spent millions of dollars to keep the bridge passable.

A Road Map

Last year, the Department of Transportation's proposed a \$25.8 billion, [five-year capital plan](#) for road and bridge projects statewide. Parker said that the five-year capital projects plan contained a lot of major projects that would have helped prevent bridges from getting to the state of repair the Kosciusko bridge is currently in.

In October, though, Paterson rejected the proposal, saying the state's finances would not allow the expenditure. Currently there is a [two-year, \\$6.9 billion capital plan proposed](#). "There are no big projects in the two-year plan," said Farber. "There is lots of maintenance just to keep things standing, and the DOT knows they are going to suffer because of that."

Dilan has said the state's roads and bridges need at least \$5 billion a year "to bring them up to acceptable standards." He is calling for, at minimum, at two-year \$10 billion plan.

Paterson was looking to secure private investment for major projects like the rebuilding the Tappan Zee and Kosciusko bridges through the [Commission on State Asset Maximization](#). The commission was established by executive order in 2008 to study public-private partnerships. Commission members include former State Comptroller Carl McCall, Assemblyman Herman Farrell and Libous. Its executive director is Sam Barend.

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According to a [report by the New York Post](#) the commission was set to establish a board that would have sought out private investment just as the scandals and legal trouble started building for Paterson. Sources told the Post that the political fallout damaged the commission's ability to move forward. Calls to Paterson's office and to Barend about the current state of private investment in infrastructure were not returned.

Regardless of how the work is funded, a growing number of legislators say more has to be done to keep New York's roads safe while simultaneously putting people to work. The state lost 33,400 construction jobs last year according to Farber. She expects next year to be much worse.

In a [March 18 op-ed for The Capitol](#) , Dilan wrote that investing in construction projects around the state will end up boosting the economy by providing jobs, as opposed to the current situation, in which construction workers are being forced onto the unemployment lines.

"Investment in and the maintenance of our transportation system puts people to work and helps to keep goods and people moving," wrote Dilan. "We must end old practices of under-funding our capital plans. We now can see firsthand the effect pilfering of our dedicated transportation funds has had on our state."

Dilan then referred to the Crown Point Bridge which traverses Lake Champlain on the Vermont border. Last fall, New York and Vermont officials determined the 80-year-old bridge was beyond repair. They closed the decrepit structure in October and [blew it up](#) a few days after Christmas.

With the bridge out, ferry service was increased but for some residents, that did not help. Commercial sections in the area became ghost towns. A large number of the 3,400 commuters who traveled the bridge must now drive an extra 100 miles to their jobs. Some residents [speak](#) of waking up in the wee hours of the morning to make the right ferry or to allow for the time to drive around the edge of the lake.

Most medical services are available on the Vermont side, and to some on the New York side, it feels like Crown Point was blown up along with the bridge. There is now squabbling over who

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and how the bridge will be replaced.

"Crown Point Bridge and the citizens who relied on it daily are not only the victims of careless money management," Dilan wrote." They are also victims of an antiquated policy when it comes to our roads and bridges: a policy of deferred maintenance and exorbitant replacement costs. It has opened our eyes to the fact that a better investment strategy is to 'fix it first.'"