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Many Failing Roads, Little Repair Money

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OF all the tattered swaths of pavement that pock the New York area's road system, home to some of the country's most bone-rattling stretches of asphalt, few can match the combination of structural disrepair and functional obsolescence of the [Pulaski Skyway](#).

Opened in 1932, the hulking 3.5-mile elevated highway connecting Jersey City, South Kearny and Newark stands today as a kind of industrial Acropolis: its entrance ramps and lane widths dangerously outdated, its roadbed and concrete railings crumbling so badly that the state has installed netting to catch the falling debris. New Jersey spends tens of millions of dollars each year to maintain the worn roadway, but it will likely be a decade or more before the state can afford the \$1.2 billion needed to replace or refurbish it.

"When you get on the entrance ramp of the Pulaski Skyway, you feel your pulse start to race, your adrenaline starts to pump and your eyes dart back and forth looking for holes," said Jeff Jotz, who lives in Rahway, N.J., and lost all four of his car's hubcaps during two months of commuting on the Pulaski. "People are darting in and out, and there's no shoulder. You're up in the air, and there's just nowhere to go."

Mr. Jotz and the 85,000 other people who drive the Skyway daily are hardly alone in their distress. A June study by the [American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials](#) ranked road conditions in New York, Connecticut and New Jersey 43rd, 44th and 50th, respectively, among the states.

The shoddy conditions are partly due to the sheer volume of traffic in the country's most densely populated region. But urban planners and infrastructure experts say the deterioration of the area's roads is also the result of shortsighted policy decisions by state government officials who have often been more eager to build new highways than repair existing streets or alleviate traffic by improving mass transit, and who have repeatedly tapped transportation funds for other projects.

Drivers may finally notice some relief this year as states use federal economic stimulus money to pay for billions of dollars in road improvements.

New York City is spending \$261 million of its stimulus money on road and bridge improvements, including repairing access ramps on the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn and Queens, and reconstruction projects on the Brooklyn Bridge and East Houston and West 125th Streets in Manhattan. New Jersey is anticipating \$652 million for road and bridge projects, including repaving parts of the New Jersey Turnpike, the Garden State Parkway and Interstate 295.

Connecticut plans to spend \$302 million on, among other things, upgrades to the Merritt Parkway and a bridge on busy Route 5. New York State is using \$154 million to make improvements on roads and bridges on

Long Island, including the Meadowbrook, Sagtikos and Southern State Parkways.

But the stimulus money is a one-shot deal to finance repairs long delayed. To redress years of neglect, states would need to find a way to significantly increase spending and refocus their priorities, transportation planners say.

Federal money finances the bulk of major highway costs, but state and local governments around New York have been inconsistent, at best, at picking up the rest. Since 1984, New Jersey has used a gasoline tax to underwrite a transportation trust fund, but the fund has piled up so much debt that officials have said it could cease taking on new projects by 2011. Local officials in New York State have long complained that Albany diverts millions in tax revenue intended for road repairs to pay for other projects.

Officials in Connecticut, which relies more on federal aid for road projects than most other states, have also been criticized for siphoning off road repair money to the general budget.

“They’re hijacking the money to pay for other pet projects in the budget,” said Donald Shubert, executive secretary of the Connecticut Road Builders Association, an advocacy group for construction firms. “And the drivers in the state are paying for it.”

The recession has made a bad situation worse, because most roads belong to counties, cities and towns that are facing mounting budget problems.

“We’ve created this bind, this suburban-oriented society, where we want more roads and use them more quickly, but aren’t willing to pay for them,” said Robert E Paaswell, a civil engineering professor and director of the [University Transportation Research Center](#) at the [City University of New York](#).

Years of putting off maintenance have left the 84,000 miles of roads traversing New Jersey, Connecticut, Long Island and Westchester County in pitiable shape. The national highway study found that the percentage of local roads in poor condition exceeded the national average of 13 percent: in New Jersey it was 46 percent, New York, 22 percent, and Connecticut, 14 percent. That caused more than just frayed nerves: the study estimated that bad roads cost a typical New Jersey driver \$596 per year in repairs and vehicle wear and tear.

New Jersey officials say they have begun the long process of upgrading: this year, a transportation spokeswoman said, the state is repaving 623 miles.

Since 2000, New Jersey has spent less than 5 percent of its capital budget for transportation on expanding the capacity of its roads. During the 1990s, the state spent more than 50 percent of it some years on new roads, a practice that Kate Slevin of the Tri-State Transportation Campaign, an infrastructure planning group, called “misguided.”

Transportation officials in the region say they are making incremental progress in improving road conditions. Eileen Peters, a spokeswoman for New York State’s Department of Transportation, said that 86 percent of roads maintained by the state in Nassau and Suffolk Counties were rated good or excellent in 2007.

But those numbers offer little comfort to drivers who travel the thousands of miles of county and municipally maintained roads on Long Island, where, local officials say, there is an extensive backlog of streets in need of

repair or replacement. In Hempstead, for example, road engineers usually have enough money to repave six to eight of the 300 miles of roads each year, so residents must endure pockmarked streets for weeks, months and sometimes years.

The situation is even more pressing in the Westchester city of Peekskill. Last year, city engineers assessed its 50 miles of streets, some of which are so badly worn that grass grows through the pavement, and estimated that \$9 million would be needed just to restore them to average condition.

But the amount of state aid Peekskill gets for road repaving — \$245,000 — has stayed the same for a decade, so city officials are considering a bond issue of \$1.3 million to buy 11 tons of asphalt and repave about five miles.

“They say they’re going to fix things, but they usually don’t,” said Ralph Nardone, who is 83 and has lived in Peekskill for 35 years. “Maybe they patch a pothole or fill a hole. But repaving? They’re not going to spend that kind of money. There are so many problems all over Peekskill that no one would even know where to start.”

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