

## **What's Wrong With Us?**

By BOB HERBERT

[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)

Published in The New York times: February 15, 2010

Harrisburg, Pa.

Gov. Ed Rendell likes to tell a story that goes back to his days as mayor of Philadelphia. As he recalled, the city had a long cold snap with about a month and a half of below-freezing temperatures. Then, abruptly, the mercury rose into the 60s, he said, “and 58 of our water mains broke, causing all sorts of havoc.”

The pipes were old. Some were ancient. “My water people told me that some had been laid in the 19th century,” said Mr. Rendell, “and they were laid shallow, without much protection. So with any radical changes in temperature, they were susceptible to breaking. We had a real emergency on our hands.”

Infrastructure, that least sexy of issues, is not just a significant interest of Ed Rendell's; it's more like a consuming passion. He can talk about it energetically and enthusiastically for hours and days at a time. He has tried to stop the hemorrhaging of Pennsylvania's infrastructure, and he travels the country explaining how crucially important it is for the United States to rebuild a national infrastructure landscape that has deteriorated so badly that it is threatening the nation's economic viability.

Two years ago, a bridge inspector who had stopped for lunch in Philadelphia's Port Richmond neighborhood happened to glance up at a viaduct that carries Interstate 95 over the neighborhood. He noticed a 6-foot crack in a 15-foot column that was supporting the highway. His sandwich was quickly forgotten. Two miles of the highway had to be closed for three days for emergency repairs to prevent a catastrophe from occurring.

These kinds of problems are not peculiar to Pennsylvania. New Orleans was lost for want of an adequate system of levees and floodwalls. Lawrence Summers, President Obama's chief economic adviser, tells us that 75 percent of America's public schools have structural deficiencies. The nation's ports, inland waterways, drinking water and wastewater systems — you name it — are hurting to one degree or another.

Ignoring these problems imperils public safety, diminishes our economic competitiveness, is penny-wise and pound-foolish, and results in tremendous missed opportunities to create new jobs on a vast scale.

Competitors are leaving us behind when it comes to infrastructure investment. China is building a network of 42 high-speed rail lines, while the U.S. has yet to build its first. Other nations are well ahead of us in the deployment of broadband service and green energy technology. We spend scandalous amounts of time sitting in traffic jams or enduring the endless horrors of airline

travel. Low-cost, high-speed Internet access is a science-fiction fantasy in many parts of the United States.

What's wrong with us?

We're so far behind in some areas that Governor Rendell has said that getting our infrastructure act together can feel like "sledding uphill."

"When I took over as governor," he said, "I was told that Pennsylvania led the nation in the number of structurally deficient or functionally obsolete bridges. We had more than 5,600 of them. So I put a ton of money into bridge repair. We more than tripled the amount in the capital budget, from \$200 million a year to \$700 million a year. And I got a special appropriation from the Legislature to do \$200 million a year extra for the next four years."

The result? "Well, the good news is that we repaired a lot of bridges," said Mr. Rendell. "The bad news is that by the end of my sixth year, the end of 2008, the number of deficient or structurally obsolete bridges had gone from 5,600 to more than 6,000.

"The reason is that we lead the nation in bridges 75 years or older, and the recommended lifespan for a bridge is 40 years. So every time we fixed two, three would bump onto the list."

He said he hopes that by the end of this year the list will be pared to 4,300 bridges, which he described as "still way too high."

It's easy, especially in tough economic times, to push aside infrastructure initiatives, including basic maintenance and repair, in favor of issues that seem more pressing or more appealing. But this misses the point that infrastructure spending that is thoughtful and wise is an investment, a crucial investment in the nation's future — and it's a world-class source of high-value jobs.

The great danger right now is that we will do exactly the wrong thing, that we'll turn away from our screaming infrastructure needs and let the deterioration continue. With infrastructure costs so high (the needs are enormous and enormously expensive) and with the eyes in Washington increasingly focused on deficit reduction, the absolutely essential modernizing of the American infrastructure may not take place. That would be worse than foolish. It would be tragic.

By BOB HERBERT

Published in The New York times: February 15, 2010