

In National Parks Aging Roads Pose Growing Challenge for Managers

\$12 billion in overdue repairs includes infrastructure vital to accessibility

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A construction crew works on repairs to the Grand Loop Road at Yellowstone National Park in May 2019. Transportation-related deferred maintenance in the park totals nearly \$370 million.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

It's a safe bet that America's national parks would never have become the popular attractions they are today without extensive, reliable transportation to carry visitors to, from, and through the parks. From the railroads built in the late 1800s and early 1900s to serve the first western parks to the early carriage paths and roads that followed, transportation

infrastructure is vital to visitors' access and enjoyment of these significant sites. Today the National Park Service (NPS) maintains more than 5,000 miles of paved roads, as well as tunnels and bridges. But many of these roads are showing their age, and park managers are grappling with a backlog of transportation-related repairs—part of \$12 billion in deferred maintenance that is challenging NPS sites across the country.

For example, many park roads were constructed decades ago when cars were smaller; as a result, routes often are narrow and lack shoulders—an issue for today's larger cars and recreational vehicles. Also, increased visits at many park sites lead to overflowing parking lots, forcing visitors to park on roadsides, which in turn damages natural resources and can be a safety hazard.



Denali, the highest peak in North America at 20,308 feet, looms over the landscape in Alaska's Denali National Park, where thousands of visitors use the 92-mile Denali Park Road every year. The park needs over \$30 million in transportation-related repairs.

Tim Rains / National Park Service

Increased visits combined with the aging of facilities and inconsistent funding have made it difficult for NPS to keep up with needed repairs; the agency has an estimated \$12 billion maintenance backlog. Transportation-related assets (roads, bridges, tunnels, and parking lots) account for half of that total (\$6.2 billion). Of those transportation needs, repairs totaling \$4.8 billion are categorized as high or highest priority. Last year, agency application requests for funding for "megaprojects" (transportation maintenance repairs that are well above core

agency funding) amounted to nearly \$2 billion, far exceeding the \$325 million appropriated for these projects.

The NPS repair backlog directly affects visitors by, for example, limiting or cutting off access to historic sites, wildlife viewing areas, campgrounds, and hiking trails. This could hurt the local jurisdictions that depend on park visitors: In 2018, tourists spent more than \$20 billion in gateway communities, supporting more than 329,000 jobs and generating more than \$40 billion in economic output.

Raising awareness about infrastructure needs within the National Park System is crucial as Congress undertakes reauthorization of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, which will expire in September 2020. The five-year spending bill authorized \$305 billion for federal highway programs from 2016 to 2020, with NPS programs receiving about \$1.4 billion for construction and repairs.



A view from Natchez Trace Parkway, a 444-mile scenic roadway that runs through Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee and includes stops for hiking, biking, and horseback riding. Deferred maintenance needs on the parkway total almost \$350 million.

National Park Service

This past summer, the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee approved its proposal to reauthorize the surface transportation act and included a nearly 22-percent increase in funding for NPS programs. This is a positive step, but only a portion of this

funding would go toward deferred maintenance. The Senate plan would provide an increase to the Nationally Significant Federal Lands and Tribal Projects (NSFLTP) program—designed to fund megaproject maintenance work for national parks, other public land agencies, and tribal lands. Historically, the program was authorized to receive funding only if Congress appropriated it through its annual budget process. Under the Senate committee proposal, NSFLTP would receive \$50 million per year for five years in dedicated funding, and Congress also would be authorized to appropriate an additional \$300 million per year.

As the House begins to craft its proposal and Congress works on reauthorizing the FAST Act, The Pew Charitable Trusts urges lawmakers to include dedicated funding of \$4.8 billion for the highest- and high- priority transportation-related assets. A final measure should allocate at least \$350 million annually for the NSFLTP program, with \$200 million of that amount provided as dedicated funding.

By investing in these needed infrastructure repairs, Congress can help ensure that our parks are safe and accessible today and for generations of visitors to come.



Sunrise Road in Mount Rainier National Park in Washington takes visitors to the highest point that is accessible by car. The park needs \$117 million in transportation-related maintenance, including repairs to the road.

National Park Service

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