




Pittsburgh failed to heed warnings of Fern Hollow Bridge's decay years before collapse, records show

Inspectors described a cascade of problems that compounded over more than a decade



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In the years leading to the devastating collapse of the Fern Hollow Bridge, the city of Pittsburgh failed to implement a routine maintenance program that would have helped guard against the kind of deterioration that ate away at the support system of the aging span, records show.

Year after year, inspectors found that the frame legs and cross-bracing of the 49-year-old bridge were heavily corroded — and in some cases, “completely severed” — mostly from a clogged water drainage system that experts say should have been cleaned every year from build up.

But city officials told the National Transportation Safety Board that there was no plan in place to service the bridge from 2019 to the time it fell during the early morning hours of January 28, 2022.

“It's all the same story,” Tim Pintar, a longtime engineer who inspected Fern Hollow several times, told NTSB investigators in a 2022 interview. “This bridge had the clogged scuppers the whole time that I can remember. And we kept telling them to clean the thing, clean the thing. Nothing was done.”

A trove of records from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation and the NTSB reviewed by the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette describe a host of breakdowns on the part of the city that led to the span's spectacular failure two years ago.

Five cars and a Port Authority bus — carrying nine people in all — were on the [bridge when it caved in](#). No one was killed, but several of the victims sustained serious injuries. By coincidence, President Joe Biden was in town that day to talk about his national infrastructure program and visited the collapse site.

In transcripts and dozens of emails, inspectors describe a cascade of problems with the span that compounded over more than a decade, and repeated warnings that went ignored by city officials — failures that risked the safety of the estimated 14,000 people who drove across the bridge each day.

The records are at the center of an ongoing legal battle waged by victims of the collapse against the city, and could factor significantly into the NTSB's investigation, which is expected to be released next month.

The developments come as the [city contends with the upkeep of aging bridges in nearly every neighborhood](#) — nearly two-dozen rated in poor condition throughout Pittsburgh — and exorbitant costs to repair the structures.

‘Nothing ever got done’

During the collapse of Fern Hollow, one car landed upside down near the

east end of the bridge, and the driver suffered broken bones in his neck, a fractured sternum and developed blood clots in his lungs. An elderly couple broke several vertebrae. The driver of the Port Authority bus has been treated for back, neck and shoulder injuries and suffers from ongoing post-traumatic stress disorder.

Next week, the victim's attorneys said they plan to sue additional parties who they believe failed to prevent the span from spiraling into a safety hazard.

In a key interview conducted by the NTSB just months after Fern Hollow crumbled to the ground, inspector Mr. Pintar, who was working for CDM Smith engineering firm, said he warned the city for years about the bridge's structural deficiencies.



A Port Authority bus is seen in the wreckage of the collapsed Fern Hollow Bridge, Saturday, Jan. 29, 2022, in Frick Park.

(Alexandra Wimley/Post-Gazette)

As early as 2014, he wrote to city officials about loose concrete and clogged scuppers — a major cause of deterioration — according to emails released by PennDOT.

In the ensuing years, the warnings grew. A March 2018 letter flagged braces that were “completely severed by corrosion” and warned that parts

of the cross-frame could “break away and fall” onto the trail below.

“I tried to preach that [the] whole time, and nothing ever got done,” Mr. Pintar told investigators.

In September and November 2018, he sent more emails asking whether the bridge had been repaired. City officials finally removed the bracing in January 2019 — more than nine months after they were first alerted. It remains unclear whether any other repairs were made.

Quick fix

The breakdowns stretch even farther back, NTSB records show. Reports as early as 2005 showed the bridge’s legs were “fracture critical.” But in a 2007 email, Ron Capp, who managed bridge inspections for contractor Michael Baker, said the city did not want to repair the legs because that would require closing the bridge to traffic for a brief period. Officials also didn’t ask for a full bridge analysis because it would be “too costly.”

Instead of forging ahead with critical repairs, the city opted for a quick fix in 2009: 1-inch-thick steel cables to add extra support. It was supposed to be “a temporary measure,” said Mr. Capp, but the cables were in place right up to the bridge’s fall 13 years later.

[In a 2022 investigation by the Post-Gazette](#) that exposed details of the city’s failure to remediate Fern Hollow, experts said they were baffled that the city would resort to cables as a bracing mechanism to support beams designed to hold up large bridges.

“Maybe in the short term to brace something but not in the long term,” said Roberto Leon, a construction engineering professor at Virginia Tech University. “I’ve talked to a couple friends who are also in the bridge world, and they’ve also never heard of something like that.”

Hota GangaRao, an engineering professor at West Virginia University, agreed: “That’s like using a Band-Aid on a cancerous wound.”

Mr. Pintar, Fern Hollow’s main inspector, told investigators during their interview in 2022 that he was never informed about the cables before they were installed.

And then there were the breakdowns that led to the installation of the cables: In emails to the city and interviews with the NTSB, Mr. Capp and Mr. Pintar said repeatedly that the bridge's drainage problems — which would've been a cheap fix — were the root cause of corrosion.

City officials told the NTSB just months after Fern Hollow's demise that they hadn't cleaned the drainage systems at least as far back as 2019, and had no records to show that they had done it earlier, either.

A broader infrastructure problem

The detailed reports, released by federal and state agencies in the last month, represent some of the information that attorneys for the victims had been fighting in court to obtain for more than a year. Under state law, the city is capped at paying \$500,000 total in damages.

For months, city officials refused to turn over documents, citing the NTSB's ongoing investigation. In November, County Judge Philip A. Ignelzi held a hearing on the matter, and [ordered the city and its contractors to turn over records](#) for him to review privately.

“Why would the federal government give two doodle-does whether I release this information?” Judge Ignelzi said during the hearing.

The victims' attorneys tossed out their requests for documents last week, saying they received all of the information they needed from other sources.

More broadly, the newly released documents raise questions about Pittsburgh's ability to meet the scale of its infrastructure problem.

Mayor Ed Gainey said in a press release last year that he has instituted some fixes since Fern Hollow collapsed; the city added five new positions to the Bridges and Structures Division, new funding for maintenance, and completed joint flushing and scupper repairs for 25 bridges in fall 2022.

But across the city, there are 23 bridges rated in poor condition, [state data shows](#), with millions of dollars in deferred maintenance.

A 2018 email from PennDOT engineer Louis Ruzzi said repairing the city's 11 most dilapidated bridges could cost up to \$10.5 million. The city

budgeted \$600,000 for bridge maintenance that year.

Olga George, a spokesperson for Mayor Gainey, declined to comment.

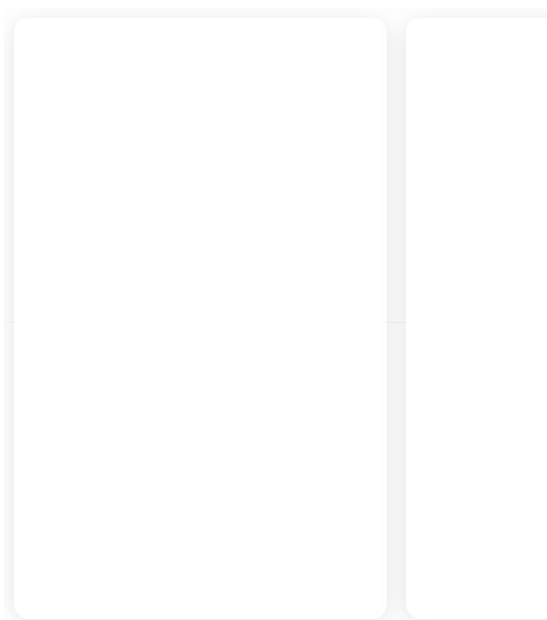
Mr. Ruzzi, in his email, criticized the city's "lack of response" to serious bridge defects.

"Clearly this problem is so big that we can't just rely on the City providing \$600k every year to solve the problems," he wrote.

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