



Pittsburgh's run-down bridges face yearslong backlog of repairs, tens of millions in maintenance

Records show the city has failed repeatedly to respond to inspectors' alerts that

major repairs and fundamental safeguards were needed

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In the throes of Pittsburgh's financial crisis in 2014, auditors issued a stern warning to local officials: Fix the aging Charles Anderson Bridge — a major span stretching from Oakland to Schenley Park — or it could be shut down and force detours on 20,000 motorists each day.

But the critical repairs were never performed on the 86-year-old bridge, even

as the rusting underside and deck continued to deteriorate.

Nine years later, the predictions came true. With the superstructure at risk of “imminent failure,” [local officials closed](#) one of the most well-traveled thoroughfares in the city.

While much has been written about the [city’s failures leading up to the collapse of the Fern Hollow Bridge](#) two years ago, the lack of response by local officials to the alarms about the Charles Anderson exposes a deeper problem impacting scores of bridges in nearly every

corner of the city.

In bridge after bridge, records show the city has [failed repeatedly to respond to inspectors' alerts](#) that major repairs and fundamental safeguards needed to be implemented.

At the Larimer Bridge, hunks of concrete began to break off and fall.

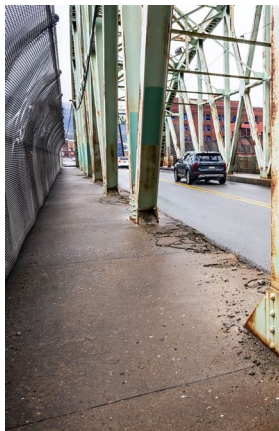
At the Swindell Bridge, inspectors found the floor beams so corroded that deep holes punctured the surface.

The 28th Street Bridge, a major artery for travel between Polish Hill and the Strip District, received

repairs in 2019, but debris was still falling from the span a year later, inspectors noted.

“We need to be more proactive,” state Sen. Jay Costa, D-Allegheny, said.

“We’ve got to find out where our problem bridges are and not wait for something to happen to address it.”



The 28th Street Bridge between Polish Hill and downtown Pittsburgh has had repairs in 2019, but debris still fell from the span a year later, according to inspectors.

Yearslong

wait for repairs

While Mayor Ed Gainey and other officials have bolstered their bridge oversight — the city added new funding for maintenance and introduced five new positions to the Bridges and Structures Division to tend to the iconic structures — Pittsburgh is now faced with the specter of repairing 22 bridges rated in poor condition, the same number as when Fern Hollow crumbled to the ground.

“The Fern Hollow Bridge for many Americans was a wakeup call for something we already know all

too well, which is over the last half-century, America allowed its critical infrastructure to deteriorate,” U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said during a press conference Wednesday.

While all bridges need periodic repairs — and sometimes replacements — experts say the lack of a rigorous maintenance program may have set Pittsburgh back years in addressing its most urgent infrastructure needs.

So far, the city is only positioned to carry out one major renovation this year: The

Charles
Anderson.
Several bridges
rated in poor
condition won't
undergo
renovations for
five years or
longer, and each
bridge can take a
year or more to
be fully
rehabilitated as
the costs of
repairs climb.

Pittsburgh bridges rated 'poor'

Of the 147 bridges owned by the City of Pittsburgh, 22 of them have been deemed to be in poor condition by the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. Poor is the worst rating the state can give a bridge. Nine of the bridges are slated to receive state and federal funding in coming years, but only one – the Charles Anderson Memorial Bridge – is scheduled to start construction this year.



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imes Hilston

For the Larimer
Bridge, city
officials had to
install netting to
stop chunks of
the underside
from tumbling
down onto the
four-lane
Washington
Boulevard below.
The span isn't
scheduled to

undergo major repairs until 2026.

The Lowrie Street Bridge, also rated poor, isn't scheduled for fixes until 2032.

The Ansonia Bridge, which stretches over the heavily trafficked Route 51, has been shut down because of structural deficiencies for more than seven years and it will be another seven years before it gets a major renovation.

Further aggravating the problem is that the more time that passes — with traffic pounding the structures — the greater probability the

bridges will
require more
extensive work.

The cost will be
steep: a private
consultant hired
by the city
estimated that
urgent repairs
could cost up to
\$11.7 million, and
renovations for
several of the
city's aging
bridges could
total in the
hundreds of
millions, bogging
down taxpayers
for generations,
records and
interviews show.

“When you don't
have the
resources, you
don't have the
resources,” Mr.
Costa said.
“That's the
problem.”

**“Wh
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Costly upgrades

In the years since the Fern Hollow collapse, Mr. Gainey has [increased the city's budget](#) for bridge upgrades from about \$750,000 when he first took office to about \$4.75 million in 2023. The city is also expected to

receive about \$3.6 million from the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission for the Bridge Preservation and Restoration Fund this year. But those funds will barely dent the amount of money that will be needed to tackle all of the breakdowns in city bridges.

The Charles Anderson rehab alone is expected to cost \$27 million.

Before it closed, Emmett Henderson, a Greenfield resident, said he would take that bridge to his job as a researcher at the University of Pittsburgh.

Mr. Henderson

said that when
Fern Hollow fell,
his colleagues
weren't
surprised.
Typical
Pittsburgh
infrastructure,
they said. "That
in itself is a bad
sign," he said.

Two years later,
Mr. Henderson
said he's
disappointed by
the city's failure
to address the
nearly two dozen
bridges in poor
condition.

"You'd think that
would've
sounded the
alarm a little bit."
he said.

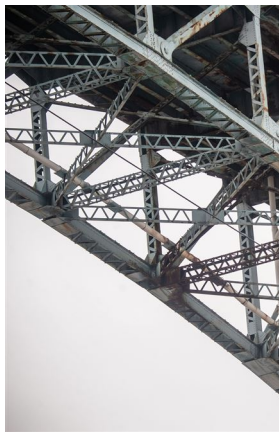
In the case of
Fern Hollow,
inspectors
repeatedly told
the city to clean
out the drainage
systems and
make sure the

surface water and salt was not seeping into the underbelly of the span, an engineer for CDM Smith told National Transportation Safety Board investigators. And every year, most of the warnings were never acted on by the city, emails show.

The same situation has happened with other city bridges. Take the case of the Swindell Bridge that soars high over Parkway North.

Year after year, inspectors found serious structural deficiencies. In 2020, there was heavy rusting and corrosion — mostly from a

deteriorating water drainage system — and “fracture critical” areas of the deck. The following year, inspectors discovered rampant holes and leaky joints.



City officials allocated
Bridge in this year’s b
show about \$3.1 million
and \$8 r

The 94-year-old span had to be closed for two months in 2022, after construction work on the bridge caused debris to fall onto the busy highway below. Last year, it [was shut down](#)

again while crews restored about \$540,000 worth of deteriorated steel beams.

“When they work on this bridge, they only do patch work,” said Dre Wilson, an employee at Wilson’s Bar-B-Q in Perry South.

“Everytime they fix something you come back and there’s another hole.”

City officials allocated no money for the Swindell Bridge in this year’s budget, but future projections show about \$3.1 million going to the bridge next year and \$8 million in 2026. Most of the money for Pittsburgh’s

bridge repairs
comes from state
and federal
sources, through
the Southwestern
Pennsylvania
Commission.

Corrosion 'a cancer' on bridges

For dozens of
bridges across
the city,
inspectors say the
most damaging
oversight mistake
is failing to clean
the clogged
drainage systems,
which can give
way to rust.

“The number one
problem was the
clog scuppers and
downspouts on
almost all their
bridges,” Tim
Pintar, who
inspected Fern
Hollow and

several other
Pittsburgh
bridges over the
years, told NTSB
investigators.

When drainage
systems aren't
cleaned out at
least annually,
corrosion can set
in within three to
four years. And
once corrosion
begins, experts
say, it's nearly
impossible to
stop.

“Longterm, it can
destroy” a bridge,
said Roberto
Leon, professor
of civil and
environmental
engineering at
Virginia Tech. “I
would
characterize it
almost as a
cancer. We have
treatments for
cancer, but there
are certain
cancers that don't
respond very well

to treatment.”

The underside of the Anderson Bridge is covered with rust, a sign of corrosion, according to Mr. Leon.

Construction bids for a full rehabilitation of the bridge are scheduled to go out in February, and the bridge is tentatively set to reopen in the Fall of 2026.



The Charles Anderson undergo major renov. expected to

The Panther Hollow Overpass, which sits just a

few hundred yards down the street from the Anderson bridge, has also been included in the redesign to fix problems that would have resulted in the posting of a weight limit on the overpass.

But in fixing those bridges, another bridge slated for a complete reconstruction has been delayed.

In July 2022, the city announced the Swinburne Bridge, which connects Greenfield and Hazelwood to Downtown, would undergo a complete reconstruction.

But when the Charles Anderson

Bridge was unexpectedly closed, city officials raised concerns about the traffic impact of having both closed at the same time due to their proximity. The original timeline from the city had construction starting on the Swinburne bridge this year, but now, a bid for work won't go out until February 2025.

The cost of upkeep

Time and money are some of the biggest hindrances in fixing bridges.

Because of that, cities often carry out short-term fixes rather than

major overhauls,
but that “creates
more problems
than it solves,”
said Hota
GangaRao, an
engineering
professor at West
Virginia
University.

The small repair
jobs work in the
short-term, but
eventually a large
renovation will
be needed and
could take longer
and be more
costly than if the
bridge was
completely fixed
the first time, he
added.

Over the next
decade
Pittsburgh is
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receive about
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But the bulk of
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The SPC
manages the
Regional
Transportation
Improvement
Program (TIP)
which outlines
the region's
"highest priority
transportation
projects" and is
updated every
two years.

With less than
half the city's
poorly rated

spans scheduled for extensive repairs by local officials and the SPC, the length of time it could take for Pittsburgh's dilapidated bridges to be upgraded could be 20 years or longer.

Even if the city has created its own schedule for repairs, it still must wait in line with other jurisdictions for the state and federal funding.

Top priority is [not always determined by bridges in the worst condition](#), but by what projects local representatives lobby for. PennDOT officials have previously said that if local

officials want to bump a bridge up the list for repairs, they can press to get the work done.

Those needs could change though, depending on who is in office and what the status of the infrastructure is at the time.

“What we have to do is prioritize the ones that are in the most immediate need to make them maintain their safety and work our way through that process by doing assessments of their condition,” Mr. Costa said.

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