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Iowa bridges need attention, but are still safe for use



Travis K. Fischer
Mid-America
Publishing

A recently released report places Iowa as second in the nation when it comes to structurally deficient rural bridges, however the conditions of Iowa's bridges are not as bad it sounds.

The report from TRIP, a non-profit transportation research group, found that 22 percent of Iowa's rural bridges are rated as structurally deficient, a number that ties the state with Rhode Island and Pennsylvania for highest percentage of structurally deficient bridges. However, while it is true Iowa's bridges are in need of greater attention and support, these statistics do not mean that one in five of the state's rural bridges are unsafe to cross.

Bridges are rated on a scale of 1-100, with 100 being a brand new bridge. A bridge is considered structurally deficient at a rating of 60. At 40 a bridge may need to have its weight limit posted, but is still safe to cross for most traffic. A bridge is closed when it gets down to a rating of 20 or less.

This decline is not a fast process. Depending on the construction, it can take between 15 and 20 years for a structurally deficient bridge to drop from a 60 rating to a 40.

"Structurally deficient doesn't mean the bridge is unsafe. It just means that it's starting to show some sign of deterioration that indicates it may be time for replacement," said Scott Neubauer, Bridge Maintenance and Inspection Engineer with the Iowa Department of Transportation. "We don't leave bridges out there that are unsafe."

The DoT regularly inspects and maintains 4,000 of Iowa's bridges, of which 51 are currently deemed structurally deficient, a number that Neubauer says has



Bridge in Ida Grove | Ida County Courier

been steadily declining over the last decade. Six full-time teams of inspectors operate across the state, inspecting each bridge once every two years. The state usually replaces between 20-25 bridges each year, along with implementing 15-20 overlay projects and 30-40 maintenance projects.

These 4,000 bridges are on Iowa's primary highways and interstates but they only represent a fraction of Iowa's 25,000 bridges. Most of the structurally deficient bridges are on the secondary highway system, which is the responsibility of local agencies, generally the city or county. While the DoT is responsible for making sure that local agencies inspect their own bridges and keep them up to federal guidelines, it is up to each county and city to perform the inspections and make sure that their bridges are safe.

"Each county in Iowa has an engineer in charge of the roadway system," said Neubauer. "They seem to do a pretty good job of keeping bridges sound that have high volumes of traffic on them."

"Supervisors and engineers spend a lot of time trying to prioritize to make sure the most important bridges are taken care of," said Steve DeVries, the Executive Director of the Iowa County Engineers Association (ICEA) Service Bureau.

The ICEA is a networking resource for county engineers that provides support through sharing

information across the state.

While the DoT manages Iowa's 4,000 primary roadway bridges, county engineers must maintain roughly 18,000 bridges connecting rural roads around the countryside. It's largely these bridges that contribute to Iowa's ranking among the structurally deficient category.

"One of the key things is that if you have 18,000 bridges, and they have an average lifetime of 50 years, then you've got to do 360 bridges a year, statewide, to keep up," said DeVries.

DeVries says that counties began to fall behind in bridge upkeep in the early 2000s due to lack of funding. Fortunately, the recent implementation of an increased gas tax has helped finance needed projects to get things back on track. In general, Iowa's rural bridges are being replaced at the same pace they are deteriorating.

"The ten cent gas tax increase was a shot in the arm to help stabilize the situation," said DeVries. "We're keeping even with the rate of deterioration, but we're not gaining on it."

While bridges do not degrade quickly, repairing or replacing them is not a fast process either. Between engineering, permitting, and securing the needed finances, it can be a 12 to 24 month process to go from identifying a bridge in need of repair to actually starting work.

Prioritizing which bridges receive these funds is also import-

ant. A bridge in great need of repair on a low traffic road may need to be put aside in order to work on a bridge that needs less work, but is much more widely used.

"Some bridges don't service enough traffic to warrant being replaced," said DeVries. "But if you have a bridge near a burgeoning metro, it may need to be upgraded."

While this may mean that a county might be forced to shut down a low traffic bridge until sufficient funds are available to replace it, the state in general is keeping up with inspections and maintenance to make sure that the higher traffic bridges are and remain safe for crossing.

Do you have a story tip or idea? Contact Travis K. Fischer at Travis.Fischer.MAP@outlook.com

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Photo courtesy of Getty Images

Secrets for Mastering the Grill

FAMILY FEATURES

With warmer temperatures and sun-filled days arriving, there are few better ways to celebrate the summer season than by firing up the grill. Whether preparing a simple dinner at home or a backyard bash for a crowd, grilling is an easy way to sear and add flavor to your favorite meats and vegetables.

The perfect party, regardless of the number of guests, requires proper preparation, attention to detail and a few handy tricks around the grill to serve up delicious options for all in attendance. However, hosting a great get-together doesn't have to be complicated.

To up your grilling game this summer, try these tips from Chef Rick Bayless of Macy's Culinary Council, a national culinary authority featuring some of the nation's leading chefs.

Use the Right Tools

Aside from fuel, there are several cooking tools that are es-

sential for grilling, including a meat thermometer, long-handled spatula and tongs, grill mitts and a grill brush. Bayless's go-to gadgets are a basket to prepare whole fish and a cast-iron grill grate to achieve marks and depth of flavor.

Get to Know the Fire

When grilling for a party, planning ahead is key, according to Bayless. It can be helpful to know the hot spots of the grill and the distance from grates to flame. Start early if roasting a larger piece of meat, while thinner cuts can be thrown on the grill after the party begins and your guests arrive.

Keep it Simple

Bayless recommends a simple menu that features tried and true flavor profiles nearly everyone loves. For appetizers, he suggests grilling vegetables and adding them to guacamole with bacon. Pair with wedges of grilled pita

for dipping, which is an unexpected alternative to typical chips.

For a main entree, Bayless suggests making meat the star and serving up ribeye steaks marinated in garlic, chilies and fresh lime juice. To cap off the meal, his go-to dessert is grilled cornmeal pound cake, served warm and topped with ice cream, berries or whipped cream.

Find more grilling gadgets and helpful cooking videos and tips for your next summer cookout at macys.com.

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