

California is falling apart; here's why

On July 19 the collapse of a "functionally obsolete" bridge shut down nearly 50 miles of Interstate 10. What was the problem? Too much rain, too little infrastructure. Infrastructure? Don't stop reading: Your life, literally, depends on infrastructure. Steven P. Erie, a political science professor at UC San Diego, says that if California infrastructure were a student in his class, he'd give it an "F." His many books — the latest is "Paradise Plundered," about San Diego's civic failings — detail the scale of California's governance mess and the massive task of remedying our la-de-da attitude that freeways and airports and levees built 60, 80, 100 years ago will last forever.

The I-10 bridge washout makes me think of the adage, "For want of a nail, a horseshoe was lost, for want of a shoe, a horse was lost, and ultimately a kingdom is lost — all for want of a nail."

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It's bridges, it's pavement; we have difficulty expanding our airports and ports. California, and particularly Southern California, used to be a world leader in physical infrastructure, and we've gone from the top of the pack in 1960 to the bottom. We have been asleep at the wheel. We're like Rip Van Winkle when it comes to infrastructure maintenance.

Why is that?

I'm a political scientist, and political scientists look across countries at public goods like infrastructure and ask, "Why is it easier in some systems to deliver public goods and not in others?" There's a theory we call "veto points." The more veto points you have in your institutions, the harder it is to provide public goods. In the U.S., we start with many veto points at every level because we have separation of powers, checks and balances. But in the last 30 years, we've added a bunch of new veto points.

Like what?

In the state we have ballot-box budgeting now. Starting with Proposition 13 through Proposition 26, we've made it harder to raise the money needed for public goods, like infrastructure. We have new environmental rules. We need to keep environmental protections, but they can be abused to kill otherwise deserving projects.

That's part of democracy — you don't want a Mussolini running the trains on time.

Right, there's got to be a balance.

You think the rise of cyberspace also has made us more unwilling to pay for public goods.

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We have so much focus on developing that, that physical infrastructure winds up at the back of the bus. The attitude [that online services are free] spills over into, "Hey, I pay my taxes, why don't I get adequate infrastructure?" If you think it's bad in L.A., it's worse in San Diego. This is a town that wants services and doesn't want to pay for them. We haven't had a tax hike for infrastructure or public services in 20 years.

Many politicians seem fine with new projects, but there's no photo-op for repair work.

And we have term limits. In many offices, it's eight years and you're out. I interviewed [former Los Angeles Mayor] Tom Bradley about what he did in modernizing the airport and the ports and he said, "Look, I had the luxury of 20 years." You don't have that anymore. So you focus on short-term fixes, not long-term investments.

The state estimates the cost of fixing California's roads and freeways is \$59 billion, and the governor wants ideas on what fees to levy and what taxes to increase to pay for it.

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And you'd get lobbying by the car repair associations against it because they're making money hand over fist! People need to think about public infrastructure investments as the future for you and your kids. Voters understood that in 1931 when, as we were sliding into the Great Depression, they voted 84% for Colorado River aqueduct bonds — a huge liability, but they realized it would pay off long term.

We need leadership. Politicians now need to point out what you're going to save in car repairs alone when [road repairs] get finished. We haven't adjusted the gas tax for inflation since the 1990s.

California Republicans are pushing a ballot measure to guarantee that gas taxes go to repairs, because Democrats have allowed it to be used for other purposes.

Exactly. For them it's like funny money. The point is, physical infrastructure really is at risk. When you think of the economic importance of Interstate 10, what the [damaged bridge] has done to trucking — it cost millions of dollars every day because of the lengthy detours.

When Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor more than 10 years ago, he cut the vehicle license fee. Did that affect infrastructure work?

It had a huge effect on money going to local governments for things like this. The vehicle license fee has become like Proposition 13, another third rail of California politics — touch it and you're fried.

There are voters who also don't trust government to use money wisely.

Voter mistrust is an easy out. It's easy to blame politicians — or waste, fraud and inefficiency — as an excuse for not paying your fair share for public services. I don't want to let California voters off the hook.

Where is the business community? Isn't it lobbying hard for money for infrastructure?

The business community tends to be very supportive; they just don't have the voice and the clout today that they had 40 and 50 years ago. And given the clout of labor in Los Angeles and at the state level, labor [can be] one of those veto points.

Are any states doing this right?

They may be doing better. I was visiting family last fall in Minnesota, and the roads, even with those harsh winters, are extraordinary. When you drive those roads, you realize how far behind California is.

One of the first things [to go] in budget cuts is [infrastructure] inspections, so we increasingly rely on complaints. Political scientists call this "fire alarms versus police patrols." Patrols are proactive; fire alarms rely on concerned citizens to report flaws and inadequacies. And even if a problem is reported by a driver, there's no money in the kitty.

It's another reason citizens think government is failing, because we have inadequate inspection and therefore bad things are more likely to happen. And the public only reacts when there's a major crisis. The trouble is that the kinds of crises we may be facing are cataclysmic, like an earthquake in the [Sacramento-San Joaquin River] Delta. Those levees make pre-Katrina New Orleans look like an engineering marvel.

You've called for leadership — and for shared civic responsibility.

Leadership starts with mayors, with governors and presidents. They've got to educate the public.

With water, we have this Sword of Damocles over our heads called Proposition 26 — that public agencies can only charge the cost of services. You don't have the flexibility to make heavy users of water pay more [than the actual cost of water] to encourage conservation. California voters have nobody to blame but themselves for this fiscal straitjacket that they've put public goods and infrastructure into.

You see a [water] backlash. In many quarters, there's no shared sacrifice, like in the Depression and during World War II. There's resistance in wealthy areas like Rancho Santa Fe: "I've got the money, I should be able to have my four acres of green lawn. To hell with my fellow citizens and the community."

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