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State faces concerns over funding needed to repair aging bridges

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One-third of Story County's bridges are operating at reduced loads due to structural deficiencies.

However, the important thing for drivers to know is bridges in Story County are safe, county engineer Darren Moon said. But keeping them that way, he added, might be a struggle.

The problem Moon and Story County officials are facing is the same as the one being faced across the state: how to maintain a rapidly aging bridge system with funding that hasn't really increased in decades.

But now the state has backed itself into a corner regarding its bridges, Moon said.

"The counties did a study statewide, and the study showed that we need \$150 million per year to maintain the state's bridges at the level they're at right now," he said. "Which isn't all that good."

Even the department's shining hope, a proposed 8- to 10-cent increase in state gas tax, which would bring in \$800,000 to Story County alone, will only bring in about half the money the county needs to keep its bridge system up to par.

"It still won't maintain the level that we have now," Moon said.

Story County has a total of 284 bridges, which, in accordance with federal law, are inspected every two years. On average, Moon said, the department repairs about two bridges a year. It's a pace that might result in something that other counties are already seeing: permanent closure of bridges that are no longer deemed safe.

A major harbinger of problems to come is in the ages of the bridges. Story County has 27 total operational bridges in the county that are 100 years old or older. Sixty-three percent of the bridges are older than 50 years. The largest amount of them, 113 bridges, was built during the 1950s and '60s when labor was cheap.

"Those have about a 50-year life span on them, and they're all coming up due to be replaced at the same time," Moon said.

In recent years, Moon said, asphalt and concrete have skyrocketed in cost, while funding to Story County has remained largely stable. The gas tax level hasn't been increased since 1989.

Meanwhile, the county itself is next to helpless. About a third of secondary roads' funding comes from property taxes, which has a regulated cap by the state. Story County hasn't reached its cap yet, but even if it does, Moon said, it wouldn't be enough to put a dent in the looming bridge problem.

"It wouldn't even come close," he said. "The majority has to be raised through the state raising the gas tax or some other mechanism. The Board of Supervisors have kind of got their hands tied."

A special state commission charged with finding the money to repair Iowa's transportation system has recommended and increase in the state fuel tax to fund repairs and replacements to Iowa bridges, Moon said.

"We're optimistic, but we don't really have a good feel for how it's going to go when the (Legislature) session opens," he said. "We think we'll at least get something."

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Henkel Construction Company employee Shawn Kellogg operates an excavator to remove the former Peterson Pit Bridge parallel to a new bridge built to replace it north of Ames, near McFarland Park.

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