

# Star-Telegram

## Tarrant bridges: How long will they hold up?

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If the 2007 collapse of Interstate 35W in Minneapolis was a wake-up call to fix the nation's crumbling bridges, dozens of Texas bridges have yet to answer.

A prime example is the West Seventh Street bridge near downtown Fort Worth, where signs of decay are plain as day. On the 99-year-old structure, metal rods that were once protected by concrete are now poking through the eroded surface. If not addressed, it will eventually make the bridge unsafe for motorists. It is scheduled to be demolished and replaced in 2015.

Meanwhile, more than 12,000 vehicles per day cross it despite a poor score on its most recent inspection.

"If this bridge were to remain in service, this would all be repaired," Taylor Buckner, a Texas Transportation Department spokesman, said during a recent inspection. Pointing to the exposed steel rods, he said, "That's one of the bigger areas of concern, because they don't directly support the superstructure."

The West Seventh Street bridge was one of several aging bridges in Tarrant County that were thrust into the spotlight after the Minneapolis collapse killed 13 people and injured 145.

But nearly five years later, a *Star-Telegram* review of thousands of federal bridge records from the National Bridge Inventory with state officials show that the overall condition of bridges across Tarrant County is arguably worse, with 29 of 2,047 bridges below 50 on a 100-point scale in their most recent inspections. That's worse than in 2007 after the Minnesota tragedy, when Tarrant County bridges scored below 50.

Of the 29 poorly scoring bridges in Tarrant County, 21 are considered structurally deficient, meaning they have problems with the superstructure or substructure. Eight bridges are functionally obsolete; they are outdated because of factors such as decreasing carrying capacity. During the past two months, the *Star-Telegram* visited several dozen bridges in Tarrant County to document their conditions, improvements or wear and tear, and the newspaper also reviewed inspectors' notes and photographs on file at the Texas Department of Transportation's Fort Worth district office.

Department officials say they're aggressively trying to fix old bridges. In 2001, the department set a goal of getting 80 percent of bridges in good or better condition within 10 years, and it completed those improvements a year early.

Officials also caution that data in the 2010 National Bridge Inventory reflects inspections from 2008 to early 2010. Since then, many of the problems documented in the reports have been fixed. They also explained that a grade below 50 doesn't mean the bridge is unsafe. Rather, a sufficiency rating below 50 means the bridges are qualified for federal replacement funding.

In Fort Worth, where 16 of the substandard Tarrant County bridges are located, city officials say that they're three years into a renovation and replacement program and that residents will soon begin to see results. The city plans to spend \$25.7 million through 2015 -- \$15.5 million on capital improvements to older bridges and \$10.2 million for new bridges along the Trinity development north of downtown -- said George Behmanesh, assistant director of transportation and public works.

The city also intends to spend an additional \$1.9 million per year from its operating budget on bridge maintenance, he said.

### Trouble spots

Nonetheless, a review of the National Bridge Inventory electronic database kept by the Federal Highway Administration shows that bridges that fared poorly in their most recent inspections are among the better-known and heavily traveled landmarks in the Metroplex.