

**Op-ed**  
**Fix on Failure**  
**By Eric Holdeman, Principal, ICF International**

When will you repair or replace the roof on your home? This is a very practical question and your answer can be very indicative of our national non-obsession with maintenance. If you are like many of my neighbors you won't fix or replace your roof until it is leaking. If this is your answer then you are in good company with government and business leaders who have adopted a "Fix on Failure" approach to maintaining and replacing public and private infrastructure.

Our modern business culture has sought to save every possible dime as an offering on the altar of quarterly profits. We have lean manufacturing, just in time inventories and yes, deferred maintenance. Government leaders have come to the same place, but through different mechanisms. Facing rising labor and healthcare costs and an electorate that is increasingly tax adverse they too have found solace in being able to find budget cuts where no one needs to feel the pain, and one of those places has been via deferred maintenance.

Ground breaking and ribbon cutting ceremonies are great places to be seen, especially if you can claim credit for the new construction. Maintenance on the other hand is not a very glorious topic. It is found in the decimal dust of many budgets both public and private.

People who are charged with maintenance often receive pressure to cut back and reduce their budgets. After all, "Does this need to be fixed immediately?" The budget analyst will ask? "Everyone is being asked to take cuts and you have to do your share." The one year of deferred maintenance is not the real issue. The impossible situation that many communities are facing is when years stretch into decades as they have across the United States. Thus we have bridges collapsing, levees failing and ferries being taken out of commission due to safety issues with the structural integrity of their hulls.

Now estimates to bring our critical infrastructure into a "Good" rating exceed 1.2 trillion dollars. Typically we don't like evaluations that rate us as only "good." But we seem to be perfectly happy with a failing grade for our critical infrastructure. I guess that is because it hasn't failed yet, or the calamities like the I-35 bridge collapse in Minnesota are seemingly rare. Inexplicably the ripple effects of these events do not extend very far in our modern culture. We seem perfectly happy to live with the consequences or to at least pass them on to the next generation, along with social security and Medicare issues.

As we face the current economic downturn deferred maintenance will not be debated in the boardrooms and councils of government. It will be addressed in a series of emails and budget development memos sent to departments. All of which will be

saying to reduce spending, cut back on your plans, put off to another day what should have been fixed a decade ago. Quick fixes and Band-Aid approaches will in the end provide us with the equivalent of a fresh coat of paint over a rusting American infrastructure.

We can after all defer many things and leave them for a successor to address. However, eventually someone will have to pay the piper when the infrastructure literally collapses around our ears.

As you sit around the kitchen table tonight and talk about your personal budget priorities for 2008; for your home, will it be new granite countertops for the kitchen, a summer vacation, or a new roof? Can you go one more year without a new roof? Yes, of course you can. Get the countertops, take a vacation—you deserve it!

This then is our collective problem.