



How America's backbone was rebuilt faster, smarter and to last

By Mike Skinner,
Contributing Author

A view along the 23-mile section of New York's Adirondack Northway (Interstate 87), which was adjudged America's Most Scenic New Highway of 1966 by Parade Magazine. The section, between Lake George and Pottersville in Warren County, is part of the 176-mile-long Albany-to-Canada Expressway.

CREDIT: FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

► **IN 2026**, America reaches two milestones that invite celebration and a clear-eyed look at what comes next. The U.S. Interstate Highway System turns 70—an engineering and mobility achievement that reshaped commerce, connected communities and helped define modern American life. At the same time, our nation marks its 250th anniversary — an opportunity to reflect on how transportation infrastructure has always been intertwined with expansion, economic growth, national unity and opportunity.

The interstate system has been the backbone of American mobility and a powerful economic driver. Though it represents only a small fraction of roadway mileage, it carries a disproportionate share of travel — proof of its importance to everyday life and the movement of goods.

But after 70 years, it's also a system living with signs of its age. Many road segments have far exceeded their expected service life and are now carrying traffic volumes and loading

demands that the original designers could not have fully anticipated. The result is familiar to every state department of transportation (DOT) and local agency: rising maintenance pressure, larger rehabilitation scopes, more work zones and a public expectation that improvements must happen faster — with fewer disruptions.

That's why the conversation in 2026 can't just be about building. It has to be about delivering — delivering projects efficiently, restoring performance and safety, and maximizing the return on every transportation dollar.

Federal Highway Administrator Sean McMaster recently captured the stakes in plain language in his address at the 2026 National Asphalt Pavement Association Annual Meeting:

“Infrastructure isn't just a federal policy; it's the pavement under our tires,” he said.

And he's right. Infrastructure is not an abstract concept—it's the daily experience of millions of drivers, truckers, emergency responders, transit vehicles and the businesses

that rely on safe, smooth roads and predictable travel times.

A BRIEF LOOK BACK

The Interstate story begins in earnest with President Dwight D. Eisenhower signing the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956. This launched what became one of the largest public works efforts in U.S. history.

In the following decades, interstates strengthened national defense readiness, accelerated regional development, enabled modern freight logistics and stitched together metro areas and rural communities alike.

But the scale of that success is what makes today's challenge so consequential: when a backbone ages, the entire body feels it. As America celebrates 250 years of independence this summer, it's worth remembering that roads—first dirt paths, then turnpikes, then highways and interstates—have always been fundamental to building this nation's economy and connecting its people.

TODAY'S REALITY

It's no longer enough to identify what needs fixing. The industry's defining question is increasingly: How do we deliver the work quickly, cost-effectively and with predictable outcomes?

That focus aligns with U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy's public emphasis on accelerating delivery and prioritizing core infrastructure



President Dwight Eisenhower signs the Federal-Aid Highway Act on May 6, 1954. Watching are (left to right) Sen. William F. Knowland (R-CA), Rep. George A. Dondero (R-MI), Rep. Clifford Davis (D-TN), Sen. Francis Case (R-SD), Rep. Homer D. Angell (R-OR), Sen. Edward Martin (R-PA) and Rep. J. Harry McGregor (R-OH). On the fringe at far right is Rep. George H. Fallon (D-MD), who would play a key role in making the President's vision a reality in 1956.

CREDIT: DWIGHT EISENHOWER LIBRARY

outcomes. In a May 2025 announcement about clearing a large grant backlog, Secretary Duffy framed the USDOT's approach as, "getting back to basics: building more, building efficiently and building quickly."


For road owners as well as the contractors and suppliers who serve them, "back to basics" isn't a slogan—it's a practical

necessity. The demands on road systems keep rising, while the constraints on time, budgets and work windows tighten.

And while policy direction matters, the math is what forces the issue.

SHRINKING PURCHASING POWER

Flat — or only modestly growing — transportation program funding doesn't



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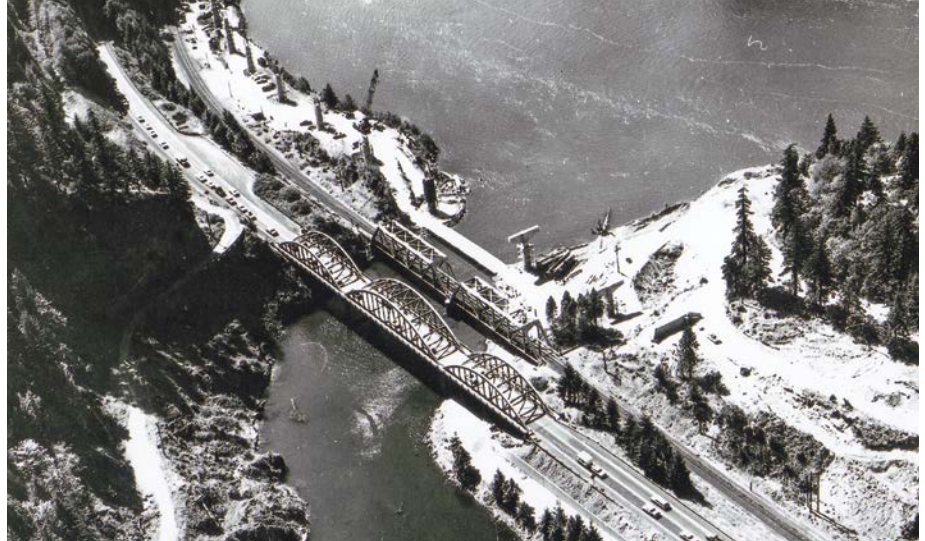
One of the clearest signals is the National Highway Construction Cost Index (NHCCI). Last May, in prepared testimony to the U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, McMaster noted that the Federal Highway Association’s NHCCI shows transportation construction costs rising from 1.91 in March 2021 to 3.19 in March 2024—about a 67% increase.

Looking slightly further back, other analyses of NHCCI trends indicate highway construction costs in the mid-2010s are roughly 70% lower than late 2020 — a steep climb that reshapes program outcomes even when nominal funding levels appear stable.

The result is a cycle road owners know too well: as preventive work gets deferred, future repairs get bigger, costlier and more disruptive.

DELIVERY PRESSURES RESHAPING PROGRAMS

Across the country, several forces are converging to affect road project delivery timelines and outcomes.



In this photograph from 1968, the Bonneville-Hood River County Line Section of Oregon’s Interstate 84 is under construction. The two-lane Tooth Rock Tunnel was used for eastbound traffic; the westbound lanes was used a viaduct.

CREDIT: FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

FLAT FUNDING MEETS RISING COSTS.

Cost escalation reduces purchasing power. When the cost curve rises faster than budgets, agencies either do less work, stretch schedules or move projects into larger scopes that are harder to program and deliver.

This isn’t just a financial problem — it becomes a performance problem. Pavements don’t pause

their deterioration because budgets are tight.

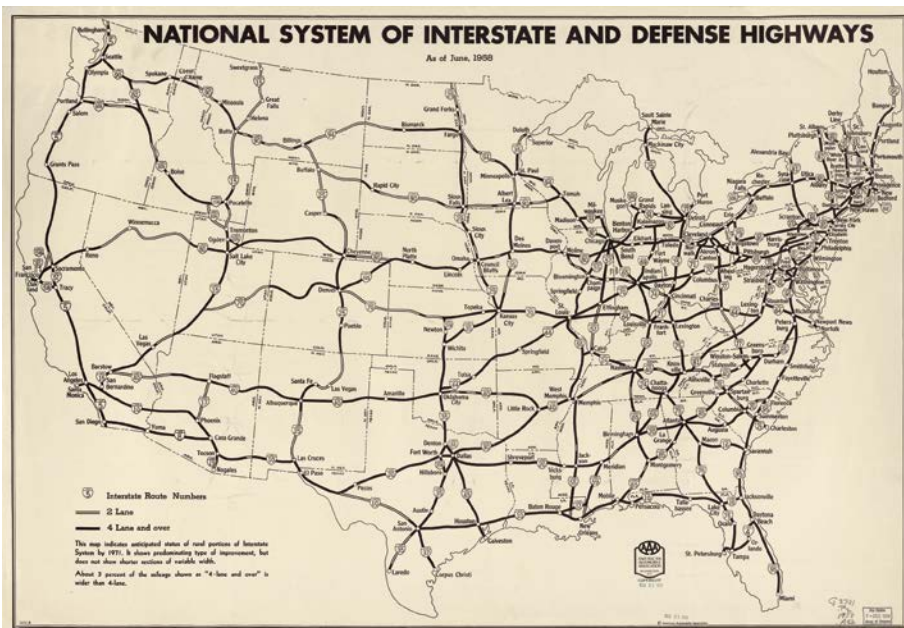
‘CRITICAL INFRASTRUCTURE’ IS BROADER THAN EVER.

In the modern infrastructure conversation, critical needs extend beyond roads and bridges to include a wider range of transportation priorities — often including major public transit and multimodal programs. That broader framing can be valuable, but it also means the competition for limited resources — dollars, materials, labor, contractor capacity and agency staffing — gets more intense.

For state DOTs and local agencies, the practical question becomes: How do we preserve and modernize core roadway performance while also meeting expanding expectations? That balancing act affects programming, scheduling and what gets built each year.

MEGA-PROJECT GRAVITY IS PULLING PROGRAMS OFF BALANCE.

A 70-year-old national highway network, combined with decades of deferred maintenance in many corridors, makes large-scale reconstruction and modernization projects more common. “Mega projects” (often \$100 million and up) can quickly dominate a region’s funding and staff capacity for years at a time.



National system of interstate and defense highways, June 1958

CREDIT: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, GEOGRAPHY AND MAP DIVISION.

FHWA defines “Major Projects” as those receiving federal assistance with costs at \$500 million or more, and those projects bring added complexity that can lengthen schedules even when everyone is trying to accelerate delivery.

The takeaway isn’t that mega projects are bad. Many are essential. But they create “program gravity.” They pull attention, dollars and capacity away from the steady cadence of preservation and rehabilitation work that keeps networks healthy.

ASPHALT’S ROLE

If the mission is to deliver more road performance with tighter windows and heightened cost scrutiny, asphalt is uniquely positioned to help agencies meet the moment.



Paving operations near Richardton, N.D., on Interstate 94 in 1967.

CREDIT: FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION

Asphalt paving supports phased construction, allows nighttime work, can enable rapid reopening and can be designed for quick return-to-service when project constraints demand it. Faster construction and reliable staging options reduce user delay costs and help regions keep commerce moving.

Road owners want pavements that can be maintained efficiently for decades. The most cost-effective pavements make future work predictable, timely and minimally disruptive. Asphalt’s ability to be milled, renewed and improved over time supports that philosophy.

The asphalt industry also brings one of the most proven circular-economy

stories in transportation materials. Industry survey data continues to show more than 99% of reclaimed asphalt pavement (RAP) is put back to use. RAP content has grown, with reported average RAP percentages above 20% in recent years compared to a little over 10% about 15 years ago.

This matters because it helps stabilize material supply chains, reduces waste

and supports cost-effective construction, while delivering performance.

STREAMLINING DELIVERY

Project speed is about contractor production and the process. FHWA leadership has emphasized streamlining to accelerate schedules and reduce cost growth. In his prepared statement to the U.S. Senate Committee on

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In 1967, construction workers pour pavement on the Huntington Bypass Section of Interstate 84 as work on that section of the interstate system moves steadily toward completion. At this point, Oregon had completed 86% of its Interstate system to present-day standards.

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Environment and Public Works last May, McMaster pointed to delivery delays as escalating costs. He called for further streamlining, including permitting efficiency, to ensure more invested funds go to building infrastructure.

That's an important alignment: When the federal objective is faster delivery, and state and local agencies are under pressure to do more with less, the entire system benefits from reforms that maintain accountability while reducing unnecessary time burdens.

COLLABORATION AND INNOVATION

Rebuilding and modernizing a 70-year-old Interstate System requires more than funding, according to Reed Ryan,

president of the Asphalt Institute. He said it also requires collaboration between agencies, industry and researchers, paired with innovation that is grounded in real-world performance.

"From the Asphalt Institute's perspective, we are proud to partner with our industry peers through the Asphalt Pavement Alliance as we help turn research, engineering and field experience into practical solutions that allow projects to be delivered faster, maintained smarter and built to serve the next generation to inherit this amazing gift we have been given," Ryan said.

Audrey Copeland, president and CEO of the National Asphalt Pavement Association, stressed the need for collaboration.



A sign denotes a U.S. highway as part of the Eisenhower Interstate System.

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"As we mark the 70th anniversary of the U.S. Interstate System, the asphalt pavement industry exemplifies how innovation and collaboration across our industry continue to strengthen one of America's greatest infrastructure achievements," Copeland said. "By uniting expertise, advancing technology and sharing best practices, the asphalt industry, through the Asphalt Pavement Alliance, is ensuring the interstate system remains resilient, sustainable and ready for the next generation of mobility."

2026 AND BEYOND

The interstate system's 70th anniversary and America's 250th birthday are reminders that national progress is built on infrastructure that works — quietly and reliably every day.

The road ahead will require disciplined prioritization, smarter delivery and a relentless focus on getting the fundamentals right: safe, smooth, durable pavements delivered on time and on budget. Asphalt will continue to be a central tool in that mission because it matches the realities agencies face.

Our industry's long-term success will belong to those who innovate where it matters, collaborate across agencies and partners and deliver road performance that earns public trust. **R&B**

Mike Skinner, PE., is the executive director of the Asphalt Pavement Alliance.