Small Infrastructure Gains Are Observed in Engineering Report

By JOHN SCHWARTZ  MARCH 19, 2013

The nation’s infrastructure is crumbling a little bit less.

America’s roads, bridges, water systems and energy networks have long been in poor repair. The American Society of Civil Engineers, which releases a report every four years that evaluates the problem in a letter-grade format, awarded the nation a “D” in its last report, published in 2009.

The latest Report Card for America’s Infrastructure, released Tuesday, has an unexpected bit of qualified good news: the grade has inched up to a D+. It is the first time in the 15 years that the engineering organization has conducted its study that the grade has improved.

The report is showing progress in six areas, including bridges, rail, wastewater and drinking water. No category saw a lower grade than that given in the previous report, though the nation’s inland ports, waterways and levees received a near-flunking grade of D-. (The full report can be downloaded, along with interactive analysis of all 50 states, at www.infrastructurereportcard.org.)
Some connected trends have led to the shift, according to the engineering organization. It cited a rise in the private financing of public projects and renewed attention from state and local government to kick-start their own projects, rather than wait for Washington to send money. The jump in private investment was instrumental, for example, in the improved outlook for the nation’s rails, according to the report. That evaluation jumped to a C+ from a C-. The group also cited short-term increases in financing — a reference to President Obama’s economic stimulus package, which focused in part on “shovel-ready” projects like road and bridge repair.

“When investments are made and projects move forward, the grades rise,” the report stated.

Gregory E. DiLoreto, the group’s president, said, “A D+ is simply unacceptable for anyone serious about strengthening our nation’s economy,” but he added that the improvement “shows that this problem can be solved.”

The engineering group estimates that the nation needs an investment of about $3.6 trillion by 2020, but that current levels of spending will leave a shortfall of $1.6 trillion.

The report was greeted with approval by the Obama administration, which has called for greater infrastructure investment from government and private sources, and has moved to streamline the process of granting permits and getting projects under way. Matt Lehrich, an administration spokesman, said, “This report confirms what we already know: that while smart investments in infrastructure have not only created jobs but started to produce the improvements American workers and businesses will need to compete in a global economy, we have a very long way to go.”

Phineas Baxandall, a senior analyst with U.S. PIRG, the public interest advocacy group, said that while the president’s speeches about high-profile programs like high-speed rail and solar energy investment were the most visible elements of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009,
“one of the things that the stimulus got right was to invest in repair rather than new capacity,” in existing roads, bridges and other infrastructure. “Pothole repair is always a shovel-ready endeavor,” he said.

An expert in infrastructure who is more skeptical of government investment, Robert W. Poole Jr. of the Reason Foundation, said the results of the new report card tracked what he has been arguing for some time in the face of doom-and-gloom pronouncements: “There actually is progress.”

Congress and state transportation departments have increased their spending over the past 10 or 15 years, he noted, and many of them have increased the gasoline taxes that pay for a great deal of road work. He also applauded the work of railroads and private companies that have invested in ports development, which show “the ability to do a lot of things without, necessarily, a big additional slug from the federal government.”

Edward G. Rendell, the former governor of Pennsylvania who is now the co-chairman of Building America’s Future Educational Fund, a group that advocates a stronger national effort at upgrading infrastructure, said “the improvement is modest, and frankly, the investment is modest.” His group has called for hundreds of billions of dollars a year in additional spending and a commission to create a long-term plan to address the issues. “Not only do we need more investment, we need to do it right,” he said.

A version of this article appears in print on March 19, 2013, on page A12 of the New York edition with the headline: Small Gains Are Observed By Engineers In Report.