

Looking Back at Longfellow Bridge

By Dr. Dave Westerling

In 2006, Steve Poftak and I embarked on a rather rigorous project which focused on the status of physical assets of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Supported by the Pioneer Institute and with plans to spend at least a year assembling the data on state assets and their condition of repair or disrepair, we asked:

Why would someone read our report?

So we decided to open our findings with what is commonly called a “teaser,” something for the reader to grasp on to as he or she was immersed in the voluminous data in our findings.¹

We wanted a Massachusetts icon, something like Fenway Park, the Citgo sign in Kenmore Square, Mount Greylock State Park in the Berkshires, the Cape Cod Canal. We picked the Longfellow Bridge which connects Boston and Cambridge.

We started with the history of the bridge, including words written by the bridge’s namesake poet. Unraveling the storied history was a joy. The bridge was like a family pet who has been left out, overnight in the cold. Over the years, who cared for this treasure in our midst? It was a classic example of our collective public apathy. Who cares?

But our infrastructure belongs to us. We get from it what we put into it. And for years our treasure was left to fend for itself. It doesn’t belong to someone else. Engineers and public officials can do great things to construct and improve it, but it belongs to us, the citizens of the Commonwealth.

We found that the combined costs of all maintenance to the Longfellow Bridge over the previous century and including the recent renovation would have been about \$143 million had 1 percent of the bridge’s capital cost been invested annually in a maintenance program. The final cost of the just-completed overhaul was \$305.5 million.²

So looking back over “Our Legacy of Neglect: The Longfellow Bridge and the Cost of Deferred Maintenance,” published in July 2017 to mark the 100th year anniversary date of the opening of the structure, what has happened?

First, the public began to feel the pain of leaving their pet outdoors in the cold. Ordinary citizens rallied to the cause. There was great awareness that the bridge was part of our fabric of life. It was part of the July 4th celebration on the esplanade, it was a connection, and it was a symbol of our past and a link to our future.



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Dr. Westerling is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Civil Engineering at Merrimack College. He is a Past President of the Boston Society of Civil Engineers/ASCE and a former Congressional Fellow in the United States Senate. Recently Dr. Westerling was Interim Inspector General for the City of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and last year he assisted FEMA and municipal utilities in Southeast Texas after Hurricane Harvey. He currently serves as Chairman of the Capital Planning Committee in the Town of Berlin MA.

It was the highlight of a morning commute on the Red Line, when leaving the dark tunnel under Kendall Square to see the sunlight on the Charles River and the bright skyline of the city that greets thousands of commuters each day. Clearly a new bridge would not do.

But the bigger story is still untold. We have certainly made great strides in bringing our aging infrastructure up to grade. Many courthouses have been repaired or replaced. The Massachusetts Public Library Construction Program (MPLCP) was first funded by a state bond authorization in 1987. Since then, the MPLCP has helped build 54 new library buildings and 169 addition, renovation, and conversion projects.³ Our state colleges and universities continue to make renovations and upgrades to older facilities. Although some campuses, like UMASS Boston, still have aging infrastructure with unfunded needs.

The current administration is striving to resuscitate the transit and commuter rail systems. New electronic signalization and automatic controls are being put in place. Station upgrades are happening along with new 21st century fare collection methods. Future key upgrades should include connection of the two rail systems into a regional rail network with more and better connections to existing urban transit system facilities. The electrification of the whole system is needed to compete with other world class cities around the globe. Electrification assures that

we will be able to use new energy sources such as wind and solar power to move people quickly and quietly without increasing our carbon footprint and contributing to global warming. Electric trains would utilize the investments made in the existing track system, and like the Longfellow, the reconstructed system would serve us well into the next century.

So looking back at the Longfellow Bridge, should bring a smile to your face. We certainly took care of that one. And looking back gives a glimpse of what lies ahead at the fabric of life in our great Commonwealth.

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Endnotes

1. <https://pioneerinstitute.org/research/#toggle-id-28> Click on Transportation, Our Legacy of Neglect
2. <https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2018/09/17/final-cost-longfellow-bridge-project-tad-overbudget/YyKhLhhRr34EDN9QX759VJ/story.html>
3. <https://mblc.state.ma.us/programs-and-support/construction/background.php>

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