

# More than half of county's bridges in need of repair

## 58% of local bridges in fair to poor condition

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Reporter



A few bridges in Jefferson County are in need in substantial work, including this one on Feather Drive south of Culver. It goes over an irrigation canal and is the only route to and from the Juniper Butte residential area. The county road department can't afford to use maintenance dollars on bridge repair but must seek outside funding.

KIVA HANSON/ MADRAS PIONEER

Three of Jefferson County's bridges are in poor condition, and five have been identified as structurally deficient. Jefferson County can't fix them until it gets funding.

Jefferson County is home to 67 bridges, 36 of which are managed by Jefferson County.

While the terms "poor condition" and

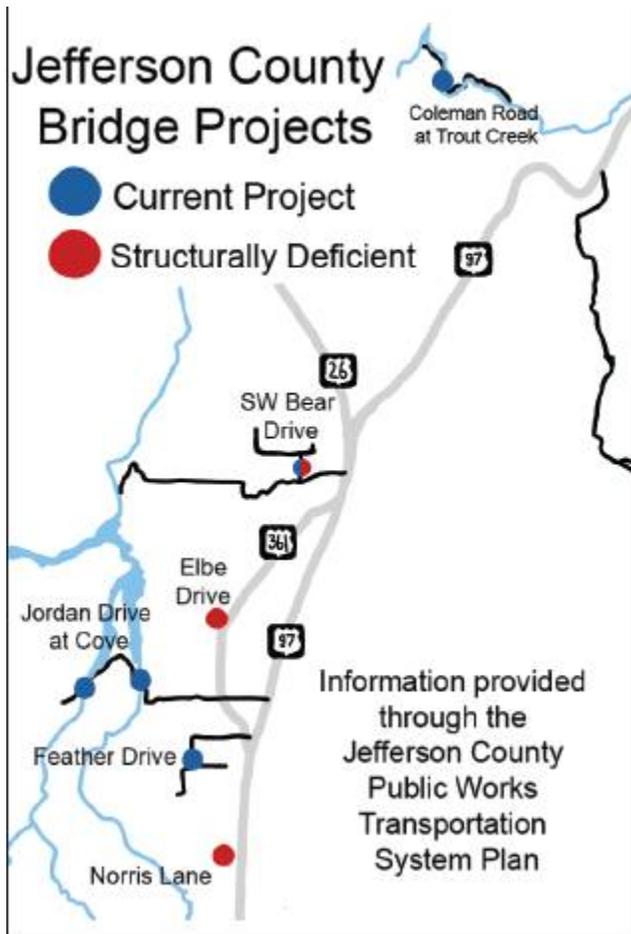
"structurally deficient" do not mean the bridges of Jefferson County are falling apart, it does mean a number of the bridges need some level of repairs in the near future.

"I don't want anyone to think that these bridges could crumble at any min-

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ute," said Matt Powlison, public works director for Jefferson County. "These bridges are not in such bad shape they'll crumble tomorrow. If there was potential for a catastrophic failure, we would do something immediately."

### Poor Condition and Structurally Deficient



The bridges across Jefferson County in poor conditions or structurally deficient have a myriad of problems. Many are made of timber, and built in the 1950s and '60s, making many of their materials obsolete. Bridge surfaces have pot holes or the substructure no longer supports the asphalt; side rails are damaged and worn; substructures rust, rot, and crack; and inspectors impose weight limits on bridges to prevent further wear.

While bridges may be in fair condition, weight limits create problems for those that use them, especially if the spans provide the only access to a neighborhood or community.

This is the case with the bridge on Feather Drive. The bridge serves as the only entrance and exit for anyone that lives on Juniper Butte, including Joanne Heare, who travels the bridge almost every day.

“I have concerns about the weight limit on it,” said Heare. “if we want to order gravel, we have to take two loads, and I worry about if fire trucks could get here safely.”

The bridge weight limit for a vehicle like a fire truck



is 26 tons. The average filled fire truck weighs 19 to 30 tons.

Bridge 31C8C, or the Bear Drive bridge, was built in 1952 out of timber. Today, it is the worst rated bridge in Jefferson County. The bridge spans an irrigation canal on Southwest Bear Drive, north of Belmont Lane. The bridge is made of timber, which has not been replaced since it was built.

The supports are

This bridge, on Bear Drive north of Belmont Lane, is in the worst condition of any bridge in the county. It was built in 1952 out of timber and the supports are under water for much of the year. The fix is in design stage at this point, but funding has yet to be secured.

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underwater during the irrigation season, putting further wear on them. The road over the bridge is also

supported by timber beams, and the asphalt over them is falling through the cracks. The project to fix this bridge is in the design phase but does not currently have funding.

According to Powlison, many of the bridges in Jefferson County were built during the '50s and '60s out of timber when the state had a much larger timber industry.

“Sixty years ago, the timber beams were plentiful and cheap, but now they need significant maintenance, and we don't have the funding,” said Powlison.

### **Show me the money**

Funding is the main barrier Jefferson County faces in repairing these bridges. The Oregon Department of Transportation estimates all the bridge repairs needed just in Congressional District 2, which covers most of the state east of the Cascades, would total over \$623.2 million.

Access to this funding is not as cut and dried as it may seem. While many public projects are funded through local and state taxes, the funding for county maintenance comes solely from two tax streams: Department of Motor Vehicle taxes, like those paid when registering a new car; and Gas Pump Taxes, the tax paid on gas when filling up. These funds are not designated only for bridges, but for the entire Jefferson County Public Works Department.

“We can't just use the maintenance dollars to repair bridges,” said Powlison. “One bridge could cost \$5 million to replace. That's the entire budget for the year.”

The cost to repair and replace failing bridges is steep. The complete replacement of bridges is too costly to even consider, but spot repairs and maintenance on bridges like the suspension bridges at Cove State Park still cost at least \$10.5 million.

This problem of aging bridges and a lack of funding is not unique to Jefferson County. According to the American Road and Transportation Builders Association, one in three bridges in the U.S. need to be replaced or repaired. ARTBA estimates that the total cost to make the repairs or replacement of these bridges would be \$58 billion. In Oregon, 1,972 bridges need repairs, with an estimated total cost of \$3.4 billion.

### **Pending Construction**

Currently, Jefferson County does not have any bridges in the construction stage. While five bridges are in the funding procurement and design phase, none can move forward without finding funding.

Of the three Jefferson County bridges with a poor rating, only the bridge on Southwest Bear Drive is in the design phase of the project.

“We take into account more than just the rating when we prioritize projects,” said Powlison. “We prioritize based on the overall condition, and take into account daily traffic, and the areas they serve. We don't just throw a dart at the board to see which bridge we choose.”

Other bridges in the design phase are two bridges on Jordan Road that span the Deschutes and Crooked Rivers, a bridge over Trout Creek at Coleman Road, and a bridge on Feather Drive.

These bridges are all in various stages of funding procurement and hope to draw funds from a number of sources.

“It really is all about funding,” said Powlison. “If we think we can get funding for a project, we pursue that one. We want to use every avenue we can to get funding for these projects.”

That’s how projects like the Coleman Road bridge are pushing forward. While the road only sees an estimated 40 vehicles in daily traffic, it’s one of the only access roads to federal lands and is popular among recreators. Jefferson County hopes to fund the bridge through the Federal Land and Access Program, which focuses on ensuring federal land is accessible to all. The project application currently stands at \$3.5 million.

“If this program wasn’t available, we probably would not have pursued this project, because it’s too costly for us alone,” said Powlison,

Other projects like those at Bear Drive and Feather Drive are prioritized because they serve as the only access in and out of a community. While the Feather Drive bridge is in fair condition, it is currently posted for load, meaning cars over a certain weight cannot use the bridge.

“We prioritize projects that affect people, and Feather Drive is an example of that,” said Powlison. “Even some power trucks are too heavy to go over the bridge, so that makes it a priority.”

As with all these projects, construction can’t begin until funding is procured. With applications for funding from the state, federal lands and congressional funding, Powlison says that Jefferson County is pursuing funding any way they can and working to present enticing projects.

“My goal is to get these bridges and the project ready, so we have applications that are shovel ready,” said Powlison. “We do all the back work of getting studies done, hiring engineers, designing, so that when funding is available, we’re ready.”