



By Mark Croarkin
Contributing Author

Talking it through

Missouri DOT has system in place to deal with deficient spans

Could one step to improving the condition of the nation's bridges really be as easy as communicating better?

I think so. I maintain nearly 1,200 bridges, which make up one-quarter of Missouri's total square feet of bridges. While funding levels are a problem, some simple steps I use for managing a system are breaking down information to a level I can manage, sharing the information with key decision-makers, creating competition and focusing on what I can accomplish. I admit a single structure's condition will typically not make or break the system, but you need everyone united to move the right work forward.

Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) is all about customer service. Managers from across the state work to report and measure quarterly profits in a document we call "Tracker." Unlike other CEO reports, Tracker measures profits in items such as smooth roads and bridge condition. MoDOT publishes the Tracker online at www.modot.org/about/tracker.htm, but there is more to the data than what is published. Each of MoDOT's seven districts reviews the supporting data to understand trends and make decisions. For five years, St. Louis has been breaking down bridge data, squeezing the best projects out of limited funds. Since transportation funding and



Missouri Bridges

Total number: 11,982

Structurally deficient: 262

Functionally obsolete: 1,764

Source: FHWA

projects get complicated quickly, it is easy for layers of government to compartmentalize and employees to develop an attitude of "that's not my job." Communication creates a team, and tracking requires accountability to prevent compartmentalization. During a time of tight budgets and declining funds, St. Louis has actually been able to improve its system's bridge condition.

St. Louis breaks down data into six charts. One chart for each of five geographical areas depicting structures less than 1,000 ft long and a sixth chart for all bridges more than 1,000 ft long. Larger bridges take significantly more planning and funding to

Figure 1. SL district bridge condition (all bridges).

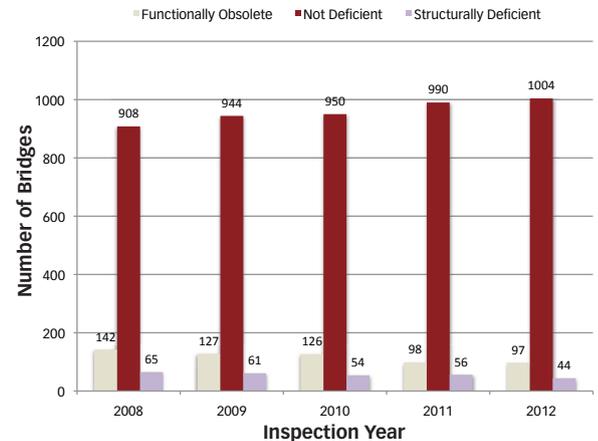
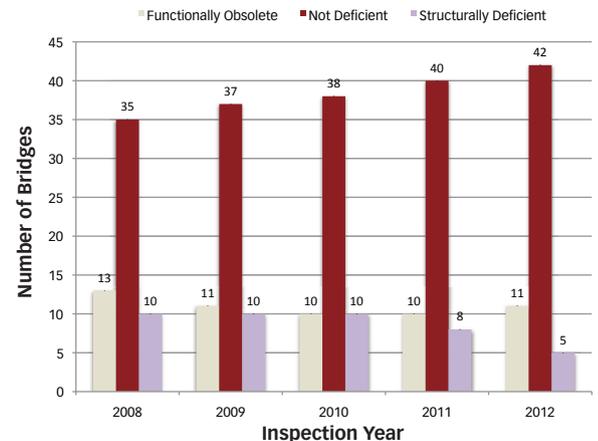


Figure 2. SL district bridge condition (more than 1,000 ft).



maintain, so their condition reflects on district leaders rather than area teams. Each chart is like a report card. If one area does not perform as well, they have to explain why.

Assembling district data is as important as communicating. With engaged employees, it is a given that each bridge deficiency will be questioned, so they must be understood annually. Prior to this process many structures had a simple fix, but no one was reviewing each structure to find those simple fixes. **R&B**

For more information about this topic, check out the Bridges Channel at www.roadsbridges.com.

Croarkin is St. Louis bridge engineer at MoDOT.