



# WHY CAN'T AMERICA FILL A POTHOLE?

KYLE SMITH

From left-wing Democrat to right-wing Republican, everyone loves infrastructure. We all want safe bridges, smooth roads, and world-class airports. So why can't we have them? Why are America's bridges falling down, our roads riddled with potholes, and many of our major airports dilapidated? Why can't the United States build or repair infrastructure like European and Asian countries do?

The answer is not complex. America doesn't have better infrastructure because of two groups: environmental activists and labor unions.

What has happened to the Keystone XL pipeline, a project to bring oil from Canada to refineries in the U.S., is a typical example. According to environmental groups, this vital piece of infrastructure is a guaranteed disaster. Never mind that pipelines are, by all measures, a much safer way to transport oil than rail cars. Say the words "fossil fuel," and the Greens are against it.

In November 2018, in the U.S. District Court of Montana, Judge Brian Morris, an Obama appointee, halted Keystone's construction—for the *third* time.

The first "final environmental review" approving construction was released by Hillary Clinton's State Department in 2011. It concluded that the environmental impact would not be significant. A *second* "final environmental review" also approved the project. It was released in 2014 by John Kerry's State Department, and also foresaw little environmental impact. Judge Morris's third review may be the charm for the Greens. At this point, a full decade into the process, it's hard to see the pipeline ever being completed.

Keystone is a case study of what Brookings Institute scholar Robert Kagan calls "adversarial legalism"—environmental reviews of every aspect of every public improvement. In a given year, the federal government produces 50,000 environmental assessments. Individual states and cities add thousands more.

And this isn't new.

A routine dredging project in Oakland Harbor begun in the 1970s wasn't completed until the mid-1990s because of legal and environmental challenges.

Four such challenges gummed up a water-desalination plant, urgently needed in dry San Diego. That process started in 2003 and was needlessly delayed for 12 years. Simply raising New Jersey's Bayonne Bridge roadway a bit to allow taller ships through—a move

that had almost no environmental impact, since it was merely an adjustment of an already-built site—proceeded only after five years of review and 20,000 pages of environmental studies.

Americans like to think of themselves as more free-wheeling and less regulated than European and Asian countries, but when it comes to infrastructure, this just isn't true. Europe and Asia don't have the redundant layers of city, state, and federal bureaucracies that we do. As a result, their ideas get proposed, approved, and built in the time it takes us to agonize over a single environmental impact study. And, to add insult to injury, their roads, bridges, subways, and airports are much cheaper to construct.

A 2011 study by Israeli mathematician Alon Levy found that a mile of subway track in Japan or continental Europe typically costs \$200 to \$450 million dollars per mile. Vancouver, Canada comes in lower than that. The Canada Line, a 40-percent underground rail system in a densely populated area, cost \$130 million per mile. Even on the high end, London's underground Jubilee Line extension of the Tube, which opened in 1999, cost \$640 million per mile. But in New York City, the Second Avenue Subway, a two-mile extension of an existing line, took ten years and cost \$2.4 *billion* per mile!

And that's not an anomaly. The East Side Access project connecting Long Island residents to the East Side of Manhattan is set to cost an astonishing \$3.5 billion per mile, according to the New York Times, which calls that "seven times the average cost in other cities around the world." Construction began in 2007 and hopes to wrap in 2022. 2030 sounds more realistic.

Why is everything so expensive to build in the U.S.? Enter the labor unions. Their motto seems to be: "Work slowly and charge more." Sometimes, "Don't work at all."

Workers from New York City's Sandhogs union, which is critical to such projects, cost an astounding \$111 per hour in wages and benefits, according to the Times' investigation. A task that could be done in Madrid with nine workers requires 24 in New York City, according to an estimate by the city's own Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

It gets worse: an investigation of East Side Access construction found that roughly 200 of 900 workers on the underground project were being paid to do *nothing*.

And such price tags and questionable union practices are not unique to New York City. In Boston, a simple Green Line extension of the light-rail network that is being built on the surface—not underground—is set to cost some \$530 million dollars per mile.

The result of all this? Americans are living in a 20th-century infrastructure world. We can't build a 21st century one.

The unions and environmentalists won't let us.

I'm Kyle Smith, of National Review, for Prager University.