



Jan. 13, 2025

Contact:

Glenn Olcerst, glennolcerst@gmail.com 412-999-2539

Debra Smit, dsmit@breatheproject.org, 412-760-7677

Rail Pollution Protection Pittsburgh (RP3) Provides a Case Study for Why Bipartisan Rail Safety and Policy Reforms are Critically Necessary



Showing 100% section loss, severe corrosion on the Freeport Bridge that could cause its collapse.

Pittsburgh, Pa. – A new report, [“2024 Safety & Cursory Inspection Report of Norfolk Southern and Feeder Railroad Bridges,”](#) of rail infrastructure in metropolitan Pittsburgh identifies serious deficiencies that pose safety concerns in our region.

The 404-page report is a survey of 20 bridges by The David R. Schmidt Company. Owner and President David Schmidt, a certified bridge inspector and structural engineer, has inspected nearly 8,000 bridges and railroad structures for code conformance over his 38-year career. The firm was hired by Rail Pollution Protection Pittsburgh (RP3) in July 2024.

Of the 20 bridges analyzed in the report, nine are in “poor,” and two are in “serious” condition. The most serious are in Millvale and Freeport. Each has serious structural defects that present a significant safety hazard to people and communities and require immediate attention. Severe corrosion was found on the bridge on Seventh Street in Freeport, for example, that could cause the bridge to collapse.

“Many other bridges also have holes in the floor girders that allow ballast to fall through that could hit pedestrians and vehicles and result in personal injury or bridge collapse if support columns are rammed,” said Glenn Olcerst, spokesperson for RP3 and a North Side resident.

Taxpayers should not have to bear the high cost to ensure the integrity of rail bridges and the safety of our city and its residents, he says.

“When it comes to our rail bridges, we are dealing with a lit bomb, but we have no idea the true length of the fuse,” Olcerst added. “Big picture, the average age of rail bridges in Pennsylvania is 110 years old. This raw steel has purposely been left to corrode for most of those years and these bridges are coming to the end of their useful life. [Unless the railroads are made to take responsibility for their failure to invest in their infrastructure, there will be more catastrophic derailments and an even larger taxpayer bill to pay.](#)”

The best example of this cost is the Merchant St. Bridge — which sits on Norfolk Southern's most intensively used line for transport of hazardous chemicals and volatile oil in North America. Eighty-eight years after a derailment on this bridge, which has had no repairs or maintenance, Norfolk Southern announced severe corrosion constituting an extreme safety hazard that warranted replacement on an expedited basis using \$8 million in taxpayer funding.

Given such subsidies, there is little incentive to maintain infrastructure. This “zero maintenance” business model is a nationwide problem— and an explanation for why yearly un-redacted rail bridges inspection reports are kept from our elected representatives. By keeping cities and municipalities in the dark, they cannot track the extent of the bridge deterioration until replacement becomes the only solution. [The Federal Rail Administration and the Pennsylvania Utility Commission are understaffed and underfunded so there is little to no oversight.](#)

Allowing for-profit railroads to self regulate is not working— and it jeopardizes the public's health and safety. RP3 believes the solution is passage of the four Bipartisan Rail Safety and Policy Reform Bills pending in Congress.

Private citizens should not have hire structural rail bridge engineers to ensure Pittsburgh's safety.

##