

In Tough Times, Shift the Portfolio Toward Preservation

By: Patrick Martens, PE

In challenging fiscal times, such as what we may be encountering for a while with DOT budgets, due to the effects of the Coronavirus, agencies have a tough task to be prudent with project selection and how they are going to spend restricted budgets. Projections for DOT budgets in fiscal year 2021 and beyond, may be rather bare bones. Many of the big ticket projects may need to take a back seat until funding starts to re-engage. There is really no reason though that deck preservation projects should suffer a setback.

The nice thing about bridge surface preservation is that it is really "recession-proof." There is always a need for bridge deck restoration on the country's bridges. If you look at infrastructure, the bridge deck is almost always the part of the bridge that is breaking down first. You may build the bridge from the ground up, but preserving has to start from the top down. The sooner you can get in and start preserving the surface, the longer lasting affect it will have on the service life of not just the bridge deck, but the structure overall.

These bridge preservation type projects are not the real big ticket item jobs that can drain a budget either. They are practical, quick hitting and very effective. Plus, plan development is minimal so that the projects can get put on the street quickly for bidding purposes.

Bridge deck preservation should always be in the agency toolbox, not just in good times, when it is more a convenience. It is a discipline that keeps the agency well-grounded, and the program well-rounded.

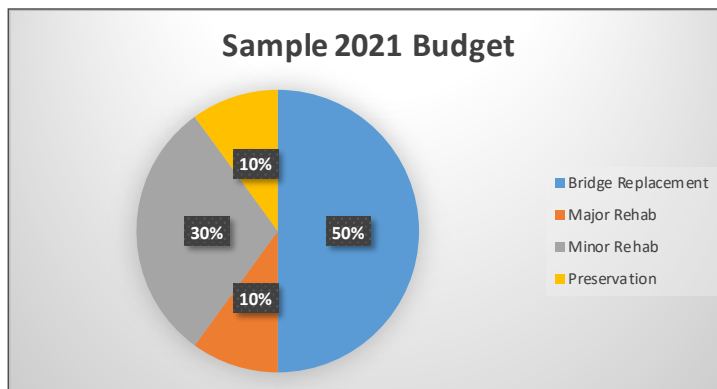
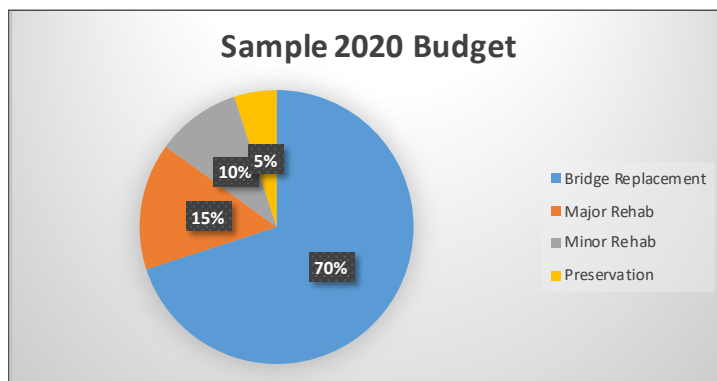
Just like dealing with stock market fluctuations, you don't want to panic and start dumping. Diversification is important to offset market fluctuations and it is the same with the bridge budget. While funding is low, it might be the time to re-allocate from big ticket jobs to the more intermediate or lesser budget jobs. In doing so, an agency is actually making a long-term investment strategy in bridges.

The ideal treatment, for instance, to extend a condition 5 or 6 deck is with a long-term investment in a High Performance Latex Modified Concrete (HPLMC) Overlay on a "fair to satisfactory" condition bridge deck. Using a Fast Track method to prep and remove deteriorated concrete, HPLMC can extend the surface life (and bridge deck life) 25 years and beyond. It is a quick and easy treatment done for minimal cost compared to a bridge replacement, or even a deck replacement. Depending on size and scope, dollars for one bridge replacement can translate into 3 or 4 bridge

deck restorations. That is stretching dollars and getting value.

Even if an agency is forced to cut its budget in half, with this shifting scope approach, it can still work on about the same total number of bridges.

The one thing you cannot do, is keep pumping money into replacements, forsaking all other types of projects. That will cost you money in the long



Think of a four prong approach to managing our bridges. One, is the replacement of bridges. Two, might be the comprehensive rehabilitation (and deck replacement) of a bridge. Three, is deck and joint rehabilitation, with four being pure preservation. In terms of funding needs, obviously a bridge replacement is the most expensive action, while preservation is the cheapest action. Other intermediate rehab is in between.

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run. If you don't preserve what you have, you are doomed to be in the same predicament, always chasing deficient bridge decks and total bridge replacements. Agencies that stay devoted to preservation and protecting their investment, find over time, that as they devote money to preservation, they move away from the need to keep replacing and actually will shift more money to preservation.

So, while times here in the short-term may get a little rough, don't bail out on preservation. Stay strong and true to it in the tough times. Feed it even more, until the market turns. When funds start to come back around, then you can readjust your portfolio. You may find though that the hidden gem of preservation is your ticket out of what ails you, in good times or in bad in getting a handle on the bridges.



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