

TAMPA — If all this talk of political conventions and hurricanes gets you down, then this report from the American Society of Civil Engineers isn't going to help any.

Tampa Bay's infrastructure earned a C grade — but maybe they forgot the "minus."

"None of us would expect our children to come home with the reports cards that we gave the region's infrastructure," said engineer Kathy Caldwell, past president of the ASCE who teaches at the University of Florida.

The society's Florida West Coast Branch handed out its infrastructure report card on Wednesday, factoring in what's currently available, what's on the drawing board and how it will be funded now and in the future in Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas and Manatee counties. Here's what it said:

- Schools got a D- for cutting maintenance and construction budgets and failing to replace older schools. In Hillsborough County alone, the society said, there are 241 schools that are on average 27 years old and no funding to maintain or renovate them.

Hillsborough schools spokesman Stephen Hegarty said the district does maintain and renovate its historic school buildings, but those efforts have been hampered by state cutbacks.

- Stormwater systems received a D grade because they can't handle water runoff from storms, which causes flooding and affects water quality. Local municipalities are planning to spend \$1 billion in the next 25 years on these systems — half of what the society estimates the bay area will actually need to spend.

- The road and transit system got a C- for being overloaded with traffic at peak hours, for officials failing to properly fund mass transit and for failing to develop alternatives like light rail.

- Aviation got a C-, but for reasons that are beyond the control of Tampa International and St. Petersburg-Clearwater international airports. They don't have much room to expand, are vulnerable to hurricanes, and the Federal Aviation Administration has yet to implement its upgraded "NextGen" air traffic system.

"Infrastructure is vital," Caldwell said. "It's the roads we drive every day to work and it's the water that comes out of taps. ... The fact of the matter is that many of us don't recognize the contribution of infrastructure until it fails."

Tampa Bay received passing marks for coastal areas (A-), ports (B+), bridges (B-) and water (C+). The society praised projects like the high-rise connector bridge that will link Interstate 4 and the Selmon Expressway and help the Port of Tampa by getting cargo trucks on the road quicker, bypassing Ybor City.

While the report was well received by the audience, there was also some pushback.

"If my child came home with this report card, I would be a little concerned," said Hillsborough County Commissioner Sandra Murman. "But we know our bridges are safe. I think we have the best airport around. So I'm not sure about that one."

The bay area stacked up better than the nation, which got a D in 2009. The report also noted the cost of poor infrastructure, estimating that Americans lose four workdays a year sitting in traffic, and that leaky pipes waste 6 million gallons of water a year.

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