

Long-term problems get short shrift in a crisis. That's true of infrastructure repair; it's also true of climate change. Like deferred maintenance, climate change just gets bigger the longer it's put off.

I often see the fruits of deferred maintenance on the Berkeley campus. Building conditions are a huge problem at Berkeley. Whenever there's a crisis, maintenance gets deferred until. . . well, until it's deferred again, during the next crisis. So too for the planet.

Although the law school is in good shape, you can't say the same for the campus as a whole. As the [Daily Cal](#) reports, the campus needs "\$2 billion for seismic retrofitting and deferred maintenance. Of 276 campus buildings, close to 120 are in fair, poor or very poor condition." (Did I mention that that Hayward fault runs down the middle of the football field?) But the state legislature doesn't see much need to give us money to deal with problems that it now sees as just normal operating conditions. And after all, Berkeley is still a great university, so the buildings can't be that much of a problem, can they?

It's not just Berkeley. Much the same is true of the nation's infrastructure. Much of the U.S. water system is due for replacement: "cast-iron pipes that were laid in the late 1800s have an average lifespan of 120 years; 22 pipes laid in the 1920s, constructed using different manufacturing techniques, have a lifespan of a 100 years, and pipes laid during the post-World War II economic boom are expected to have a useful lifespan of about 75 years." The problem goes well beyond the water system. The American Society of Civil Engineers has [graded](#) U.S. infrastructure as D+. At last estimate, the infrastructure funding gap was \$2 trillion over ten years. All of these water systems are about to hit their "use by" dates. Every now and then, the Trump White House used to announce that it was "infrastructure week," but of course nothing ever came of it. Maybe there will be a big infrastructure push as part of the next stimulus bill, maybe not. Even if there is, will the emphasis be on new construction or on the maintenance backlog?

And that brings us to the planet's environmental infrastructure, which is rapidly falling to pieces. Whenever there's a crisis like the coronavirus, we drop everything else to focus on the crisis. But carbon in the atmosphere, which is still going up, continues to increase global warming; biodiversity is still falling; and the oceans are still acidifying. All that, of course, can be deferred — we're told it's not the right time right now to worry about such irrelevant policy issues, even as the government a couple of trillion dollars to stimulate the economy. (That's coronavirus spending bills 1, 2, and 3.) But maintenance can't be deferred forever, whether it's buildings at Berkeley, American infrastructure, or the planetary environment. Sooner or later, we'll have to pay the piper.

