

# Preventive Maintenance Could Have Saved National Parks Billions of Dollars

Former agency official says Congress must act to help National Park Service address overdue repairs

ARTICLE June 24, 2019 By: [Marcia Argust](#) Topics: [Land Conservation](#) Projects: [Restore America's Parks](#)  
Tags: [National parks](#) Read time: 2 min



Tim Harvey (left), a former branch chief with the National Park Service, and other agency staff members inspect a trail next to Exit Glacier at Kenai Fjords National Park in Alaska.

Tim Harvey

“There’s an old TV ad with the tagline ‘You can pay me now or pay me later,’” says Tim Harvey, a former National Park Service (NPS) branch chief of asset management and division chief of park facility management. Harvey says the slogan of the 1970s oil-filter commercial, which advised spending on preventive auto care to avoid costly repairs later, is a good

analogy for how the deferred maintenance backlog at America's national parks has climbed to nearly \$12 billion.

Park sites across the country face a growing list of repair needs, including deteriorating historic buildings, outdated—and in some cases unsafe—utility and electrical systems, and crumbling roads and bridges. These issues directly affect visitors and put a strain on the NPS budget. Harvey says many of the deferred maintenance issues could have been avoided with proper preventive attention.

Under his leadership, the NPS transitioned to a proactive approach in assessing the life cycle of the National Park System's more than 75,000 assets. In 2006, the agency unveiled an inventory system that tracked the condition of those assets, as well as their required maintenance. This helped parks to identify priority repairs and strategically invest in maintenance before major problems developed.



The potholes and cracks on this road in Glacier National Park show how National Park Service assets can degrade when routine maintenance is deferred.

The Pew Charitable Trusts

Road work accounts for around half of the backlogged repairs in national parks and includes asphalt that is crumbling because the shoulders supporting the edges of the roads were not routinely maintained. That led to asphalt breaking off, first near the edges and then extending farther, Harvey explains.

Water seeping into cracks in roads also causes problems. Park managers often don't have the money or available staff to seal those cracks. The issue is more severe in northern climates, where ice can expand and contract multiple times, turning tiny cracks into potholes.

On average, it costs \$1 million a mile to rebuild roads but far less than that to seal cracks soon after they form. "That's the 'pay me later,'" Harvey says. "The longer that you delay [in addressing a problem], the greater the deficiency becomes."

Cleaning gutters is another often-deferred maintenance activity within parks, one that can lead to huge "pay me later" repair bills. Harvey says he's seen clogged gutters destroy whole structures—with damage spreading from shingles to sheathing to rafters and ultimately causing decay and loss of structural integrity.

Although Harvey's inventory system produced a list of needed maintenance, NPS lacked the funding to carry out the work. The agency's repair backlog grew to \$11.5 billion in 2015 by the time he retired. Harvey, whose 40-year career with NPS included more than seven years as chief of maintenance at Mount Rushmore National Memorial, knows that the solution to addressing the parks' maintenance is funding—a resource the NPS urgently needs so that visitors can safely enjoy the more than 400 sites it manages across the country.

Fortunately, bipartisan legislation pending in the House and the Senate could provide some of that funding: \$6.5 billion over five years toward priority maintenance. Congress should pass this legislation now, because, as Harvey says, "The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve and protect those resources that the NPS has stewardship of and preserve [them] for perpetuity. They should be there forever." Paying now, he adds, will help achieve that mission and prevent greater costs down the road.

*Marcia Argust directs The Pew Charitable Trusts' campaign to restore America's parks.*

## AUTHORS



[Marcia Argust](#)

Project Director  
Restore America's Parks



## MEDIA CONTACT

**Monique O'Grady**

Manager, Communications

[202.540.6336](tel:202.540.6336)



## RELATED

**Topics** [Land Conservation](#)

**Tags** [National parks](#)

**Projects** [Restore America's Parks](#)

**Experts** [Marcia Argust](#)