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# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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## Region braces for storm

Officials urge caution as freezing temps pose major threat to motorists, pedestrians

By Megan Tomasic  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Crews across the Pittsburgh region are preparing for a winter storm that is expected to sweep through the area early Friday morning, bringing with it plummeting temperatures, strong winds and the possibility for a few inches of snow ahead of the Christmas week-end.

On Thursday afternoon, members of the Pittsburgh Public Works Department bustled around their Hazelwood facility, ensuring their

snow plows were ready with salt and chains were on their tires.

In all, 60 trucks are expected to be on the roads overnight, increasing to 75 throughout the day Friday.

"I do want people to be careful," Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey said during a Thursday news conference at the site. "We know about Pittsburgh winters, we know about Pittsburgh storms. This isn't our first rodeo. So if you don't have to go out, please don't be out."

Travelers throughout much of

SEE **STORM**, PAGE A-16



Megan Tomasic/Post-Gazette

Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey talks Thursday about the city's plans to respond to a winter storm that will bring frigid temperatures, wind and snow to the area ahead of Christmas weekend.

## Senate passes \$1.7T in funding

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday adopted a sprawling, roughly \$1.7 trillion bill that would fund the government through most of 2023, as Democrats and Republicans resolved a last-minute stand-off over immigration and voted to avert a shutdown in the final days of the year.

The bipartisan 68-29 vote teed up the measure for debate in the House, which has until the end of Friday to approve a package that boosts domestic and defense spending, finances President Joe Biden's economic agenda and provisions a raft of new emergency aid, including to Ukraine.

The compilation of long-stalled appropriations bills, known as an omnibus, would provide nearly \$773 billion for domestic programs and more than \$850 billion for the military, covering expenses through the 2023 fiscal year, which concludes at the end of September. Republicans had insisted on robust Pentagon funding in monthslong talks with Democrats, who secured some — but not all — of the health, education, labor and economic

SEE **BUDGET**, PAGE A-4



Joe Serkoch/For the Post-Gazette

Less than one year from when the Fern Hollow Bridge plunged onto a walking path in Frick Park 100 feet below, it reopened Thursday — a day earlier than expected.

## 'THEY SURPRISED US'

### With little fanfare, Fern Hollow Bridge opens early

By Kris B. Mamula  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The thunderous crash and the jet engine-like sound of a severed natural gas pipe that jolted the people who live in the area surrounding the Fern Hollow Bridge in the early morning of Jan. 28, were replaced Thursday with occasional honking of car horns and a stray cheer from people walking nearby.

Less than one year — 318 days to be exact — from when the 447-foot span plunged down onto a popular walking path in Frick Park, about 100 feet below, taking with it a Pittsburgh Regional Transit articulated bus and several other vehicles with it, the Fern Hollow Bridge opened Thursday, at least a day earlier than expected.

And in less than a year, which was much earlier than many thought was possible.

On that January morning, the bridge pulled away from the Squirrel Hill side setting off a chain of structural failures. Ten people were injured, there were no fatalities, and three people, including the driver of the 60-foot 61B bus, sued the city over the bridge failure. The lawsuit is pending in Allegheny County Common Pleas Court.

The bridge, which had been constructed in the 1970s, had been rated in poor condition for many years before the collapse.

"They surprised us," said Ben Doolittle, 36, who lives near the bridge and was walking across it with two small children Thursday. "We thought it was going to be tomorrow [Friday]."

Regent Square resident Hank Gund, 60, walking across the span Thursday, was also surprised by the early opening.

SEE **BRIDGE**, PAGE A-2

## Report: City's bridges have 'critical' needs

By Michael Korsh  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Nearly a year after the spectacular collapse of Pittsburgh's Fern Hollow Bridge, a long-awaited report found that almost 1 in 5 city-owned bridges in Pittsburgh had "critical" issues that needed maintenance action within seven days.

The report, conducted by engineering firm WSP Global on behalf of the city, found that 27 bridges in Pittsburgh had "Priority 0" maintenance issues — meaning they were in need of attention almost immediately.

Of these spans, about half of the key issues were related to signage, such as updating a bridge's weight restrictions, while the other half were found to have structural problems. Maria Montano, a spokeswoman for Mayor Ed Gainey, told reporters many of the

signage issues needing attention have already been corrected.

In addition, the report found 69 bridges with "high priority" issues that should be addressed within the next six months. Almost all of these problems were structural, as opposed to signage. The report did not provide the names of the vast majority of the bridges needing attention.

Mr. Gainey announced the report's completion at a news conference Wednesday, the same day of the reopening of the Fern Hollow Bridge, which collapsed in January, injuring 10 people and sparking calls for infrastructure reform from city leaders.

A subsequent investigation from the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette found that over the past decade, state officials had spent millions

SEE **REPORT**, PAGE A-2

## Developer hits legal brick wall

State's high court won't hear bid to raze buildings

By Mark Belko  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

A developer has struck out again — maybe for the final time — in its bid to tear down an old Downtown nightclub and two neighboring buildings on Market Street.

In one-sentence orders issued last week, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court declined to review two Commonwealth Court rulings that barred the Troiani Group from demolishing the three Market Street structures, including one that housed the old Froggy's restaurant.

The decisions leave Troiani searching for options. It believes the Market Street structures are unsound and should be razed. But the city has fought that effort, even as it has condemned the buildings as unsafe.

"We're evaluating simply how to proceed because we still have concerns about the buildings," said Clifford Levine, Troiani's attorney. "We're looking for some resolution so that we can move forward with some constructive development in that part of the city."

Michael Troiani, president of Troiani Group, declined to say what the possible next options could be, though he added, "It will be an exciting new year."

Mr. Troiani called the decisions by the Supreme Court not to accept the developer's appeals "awfully

SEE **BID**, PAGE A-9



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### Weather

Very windy with morning snow. Daytime high, 23; tonight's low, -1. **Page B-6**

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# Ask The Medicare Specialist

by: Aaron Zolbrod



## QUESTION:

How do I find out what Medicare covers? What about Supplements and Advantage Plans? Is there anything one covers the other doesn't?

## ANSWER:

Unfortunately, it isn't easy to find what specific treatments or services are covered. There is a search tool on Medicare.gov but it isn't what I would consider to be user friendly. Advantage Plan plan benefit summaries discuss categories of care that are covered, but again, don't get specific on what procedures exactly. I can ease everyone's mind by explaining there are very few medical services or treatments Medicare, or Advantage Plans don't cover. However, the way services are approved, claims paid, and what the insured's financial responsibility is varies between the two types of plans.

Let's start with Supplements, aka Medigap, which are highly Federally regulated. One of the regulations is when Medicare covers a treatment, service, medical device, etc., the Supplement company must pay their share, which generally is the balance of what Medicare doesn't. The Supplement company has zero say in what's covered. If Medicare pays, the Supplement pays. Period. This to me is one of the best benefits of having a Supplement because as I like to say, "Medicare lets the doctor steer the ship." If a doctor thinks something is medically necessary such as an MRI, CT scan, an extra day or two in the hospital, Medicare and the Supplement pay the bill in full without asking any questions. If you were visiting an orthopedic surgeon for example, he or she could tell you to go get an MRI the same day with no fear or concern of that claim being denied. Except for only a couple services, Medicare does not employ people to deny or preauthorize claims like private health insurance companies, including Advantage Plans, who can dictate to a doctor, hospital, and patient what is going to be covered, or not. We'll discuss that momentarily.

There is a problem with Medicare being so liberal with their pay first and ask questions later, if ever, policy. This results in tremendous waste, fraud, and abuse. It's been estimated that 10% of the total Medicare budget, over \$60 billion dollars a year, is paid out in fraudulent charges which ultimately contribute to higher premiums for both Medicare Part B and Supplements.

As I stated, Advantage Plans HMO's and PPO's can deny claims, make the insured wait for a medical service or device, or require physical or injection therapy prior to approval. Services such as an MRI, CT scan, outpatient surgery, home health care, and others require what is known as "prior authorization," meaning the insurance company needs to give it the "okay" before a patient can receive them. Although dealing with this is one of the biggest complaints about Advantage Plans, there is a positive aspect to this situation. Private health insurance companies pay more attention to assure they're not paying bogus claims for services that were never administered, over prescribed, etc. They also do a much better job keeping fraud to a minimum. And when it comes to the lower priced HMO and PPO Advantage Plans, Western PA companies have not raised premiums on their lowest priced plans much, if at all, in the past 10 years. More recently, they have also lowered co-pays and added more ancillary benefits to their low-cost plans that offer the best overall value.

As far as if there's anything covered by Medicare and a Supplement vs an Advantage Plan, the answer is yes. Almost all Advantage Plans cover Part D prescriptions while Supplements do not. Generally, a separate prescription plan needs to be purchased by those who choose a Supplement and most now have a deductible of \$505 for drugs Tiers 3-5. No Western PA Advantage Plans have a prescription deductible.

Unlike Supplements, Advantage Plans can also supply "ancillary benefits" such as dental, vision, no cost gym access, Over the Counter (OTC) benefits, and others, which together offer significant value. Be advised that some plans provide more than others. That being said, I don't recommend making a decision based on these benefits alone and many agents or brokers will attempt to sell you on their existence only. Premiums, co-pays for a hospital stay, the Maximum Out of Pocket (MOOP), access to doctors, hospitals, and the ease of getting care are the most important factors to consider in my opinion. There is also no more important information to have than all the differences between the two types of plans. Without this knowledge, it's not possible to make the best personal decision.

When it comes to what medical services are covered, Advantage Plans are also regulated and must cover everything as good or better than Original Medicare. There are a couple of caveats, however. The authorization aspect I already discussed. Secondly, even though the same services are covered, what you pay for them can be quite different. Those on Supplements pay little or no bills, while those on Advantage Plans are exposed to between \$4,000 to \$8,300 per year in out-of-pocket expenses for medical services alone. And even plan to plan and company to company what you pay for the same exact medical service can be much higher. I often use a 5-day or longer hospital co-pay differences as an example. There are plans that have premiums from over \$60 to almost \$200/month where a 5-day or longer hospital stay has a co-pay of more than \$1,000. On a select few plans with premiums between \$0 and \$40 per month, the co-pay for the same exact hospitalization has a co-pay of as little as \$225. I realize it makes no sense that plans with higher premiums would also have more expensive costs for the same exact service. Welcome to the wild west of Medicare.

Call the office if you would like to make an appointment for a no cost consultation or if you have any questions regarding this or any other Medicare topic. Feel free to email me personally as well. Aaron@getyourbestplan.com.



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# Many city bridges in critical stages

REPORT, FROM A-1

renovating their own bridges in Pittsburgh, while the number of city-owned bridges languished in similar condition with no change.

In fact, Pittsburgh has been stuck over the past decade with the same number of bridges in poor condition — 22 in all, the Post-Gazette investigation found.

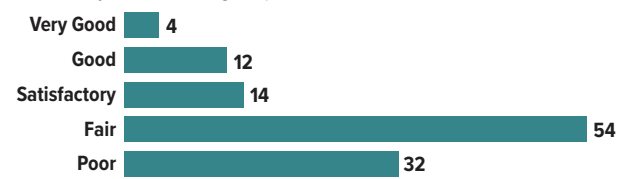
As a result of the Fern Hollow Bridge disaster — which took place after the city was repeatedly warned about decaying conditions — Mr. Gainey unveiled the Comprehensive Bridge Asset Management Program in May, which included an investigation of Pittsburgh's infrastructure and updated policies for repairing those spans in greatest need.

Armed with \$1.5 million in municipal funding, WSP Global assessed the condition of 147 city-owned bridges using prior inspection reports. Bridges with problems that threatened "either the structural integrity of the bridge (or other structures) or public safety" were also evaluated through field reviews, including drone photography.

The report also cited condition rankings from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation for 116 city bridges. The firm found that close to three-quarters of these bridges were rated below satisfactory by the state,

## Several city-owned bridges rated less than satisfactory by PennDOT

On Wednesday, the city released a report from engineering firm WSP Global on the state of its municipally owned bridges. The report included Pennsylvania Department of Transportation condition rankings for 116 of 147 city bridges and found that almost three-quarters were below satisfactory, with 32 being in "poor" condition.



Source: WESA, City of Pittsburgh

Post-Gazette

with 32 in "poor" condition.

At the news conference, Mr. Gainey told reporters that WSP Global's findings were "an eye-opener." He said that city officials were working through the report's overall issues, with an eye toward spans in immediate need of repair.

One of WSP Global's primary recommendations was that 18 city-owned bridges (10 pedestrian and eight vehicular) receive additional inspections. These inspections should include updating the current condition of structures without recent inspection information, as well as in-depth measurements of bridge sections that have been lost.

In addition to reinspections, the report recommended the city close multiple bridges and sidewalks currently open to pedes-

trians, including the Finland Street Pedestrian Bridge over Bigelow Boulevard, which was struck by a crane on Oct. 7. The bridge was demolished the following day.

The new city program will be set in motion at some point in 2023, according to city officials, and will include the hiring of a bridge asset manager to oversee the plan.

What's not clear is whether the funding for bridge repair — with much of the money coming from the state — will be changed to take on deteriorating spans that have been in place for generations.

The Post-Gazette found in its investigation earlier this year that of 79 bridges owned by Pittsburgh, 1 in 5 — including Fern Hollow — had been rated poor for at least a decade.

As for the state, it was a

different outcome: There was no bridge of the 193 it owns in the city that has carried the poor rating for that long.

The disparity highlights the contrast between how the city and state are able to fund their critical infrastructure needs — and underscore how Pennsylvania succeeded in prioritizing urgent bridge repairs while Pittsburgh routinely struggled to keep up.

At the start of 2014, the city was put on notice by state-appointed fiscal overseers who warned that Pittsburgh needed to look for ways to repair its deteriorating spans.

The PFM Group Consulting LLC, which helped to direct Pittsburgh's long fiscal recovery, and its partner, Eckert Seamans, issued a serious warning of the consequences of weak infrastructure investment.

"The repercussions of inadequate investment in bridges can be particularly dire," said the 2014 report, which summarized the poor state of Pittsburgh's bridges and their "structurally deficient" ratings.

A telling number from the report: For seven years ending in 2014, the city's capital budget allocated just over \$13 million to bridge projects, but over the same period, "machinery and equipment" projects took up \$81 million.

Michael Korsh: mkorsh@post-gazette.com

# Fern Hollow Bridge opens 1 day early

BRIDGE, FROM A-1

"I was expecting it tomorrow," Mr. Gund said. "It was a surprise."

Wilksburg resident Nancy Howarth, who said she walks all over nearby neighborhoods, took pictures of the bridge with her smartphone, before stopping to upload them to her Facebook page "so everybody knows it's open," she said. The Penn Avenue part of the bridge detour to Squirrel Hill was especially bad, she said.

"Penn Avenue was a race-track," said Ms. Howarth, 76.

The opening of the bridge ended nearly a year of painstaking detours from Regent Square and surrounding neighborhoods to Squirrel Hill from Forbes Avenue, a major connector that hurt walk-in traffic for some Regent Square businesses.

However, the four-lane bridge is still not fully open.

Crossing the bridge from Squirrel Hill, four lanes of traffic pinches down to two lanes with concrete bar-



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Gov. Tom Wolf, PennDOT District 11 Executive Cheryl Moon-Sirianni and Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald walk across the new Fern Hollow Bridge ahead of a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Wednesday.

riers to accommodate some construction vehicles still on the bridge, before opening back up to four lanes — including two turning lanes — at the Regent Square side. Another big change: the bridge is not yet accessible from Dallas Avenue, only from Forbes and the Squirrel Hill side.

Gov. Tom Wolf, Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, Pittsburgh Mayor Ed Gainey and other state and local elected officials gathered Wednesday for a ceremonial ribbon-cutting at the bridge. In speeches, both Mr. Wolf and Mr. Fitzgerald emphasized the importance of maintaining infrastructure.

International design firm HDR, which has offices Downtown, and New Kensington-based Swank Construction Co. LLC were the contractors at a cost of \$25.3 million, paid for by the federal government.

Kris B. Mamula: kmamula@post-gazette.com

## ALMANAC

### On this day, Dec. 23

**1783** George Washington resigned as commander in chief of the Continental Army and retired to his home at Mount Vernon, Va.

**1913** The Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

**1941** During World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to the Japanese.

**1954** The first successful human kidney transplant took place at the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital in Boston as a surgical team removed a kidney from 23-year-old Ronald Herrick and implanted it in Herrick's twin brother, Richard.

**1968** 82 crew members of the U.S. intelligence ship Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

**1972** A 6.2-magnitude earthquake struck Nicaragua; the disaster claimed some 5,000

lives.

**1986** The experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan and Jeana Yeager, completed the first nonstop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

**Today's birthdays:** Actor Ronnie Schell, 91. Actor Frederic Forrest, 86. Rock musician Jorma Kaukonen, 82. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer, 79. Actor Susan Lucci, 76. Singer-musician Adrian Belew, 73. Rock musician Dave Murray (Iron Maiden), 66. Actor Joan Severance, 64. Singer Terry Weeks, 59. Rock singer Eddie Vedder (Pearl Jam), 58. Rock musician Jamie Murphy, 47. Jazz musician Irvin Mayfield, 45. Actor Estella Warren, 44. Actor Elvy Yost, 35. Actor Anna Maria Perez de Tagle, 32. Actor Spencer Daniels, 30. Actor Caleb Foote, 29.

## Corrections & clarifications

If you have a correction and cannot reach the responsible reporter or editor, please call the office of Stan Wischnowski, executive editor, at 412-263-1890.

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