

Case Study: Proactive Infrastructure Management for Smart Cities Columbus**Client: City of Columbus, Department of Public Service****Industry: Municipal Government / Public Infrastructure Management****Location: Columbus, Ohio, USA****Executive Summary**

The City of Columbus, the state capital of Ohio and a major Midwestern metropolitan center, manages a vast and intricate network of public infrastructure essential to the daily lives and economic vitality of its residents and businesses. The responsibility for maintaining this critical infrastructure—encompassing hundreds of bridges, thousands of lane-miles of roadways, extensive water distribution mains, and complex sewer systems—falls largely under the purview of the city's Department of Public Service [1]. As a growing city experiencing population increases and economic development, Columbus faced escalating challenges common to many established urban centers across the nation and globally: managing the inevitable aging of its infrastructure portfolio while simultaneously meeting increasing demands for service reliability and safety, all within the constraints of municipal budgets [2]. The Department of Public Service, tasked with the stewardship of these vital assets, grappled with the inherent limitations and inefficiencies of traditional, largely reactive maintenance paradigms, recognizing the urgent need for modernization. This initiative also aligned with the broader goals of the "Smart Columbus" program, which aimed to leverage technology and data to improve city services and quality of life [3].

Challenge: The Unsustainable Burden of Reactive Infrastructure Management

Historically, maintenance interventions for Columbus's critical infrastructure were predominantly triggered by acute events rather than proactive foresight. Assets like bridges, roadways, water mains, and sewer systems, many having aged considerably and potentially exceeding their original design lifespans [4], were often addressed only after outright failures occurred (e.g., a water main burst, a bridge joint failing, significant pothole formation), visible deterioration was reported by concerned citizens, or based on fixed, time-based inspection schedules (e.g., biennial bridge inspections) that didn't always accurately reflect the actual condition or rate of degradation of a specific asset [5].

This **reactive maintenance approach**, while common historically, carried significant and increasingly unsustainable consequences for the City and its constituents:

- **High Cost and Disruption of Emergency Repairs:** Emergency repairs are inherently disruptive and significantly more expensive than planned maintenance. Responding to a sudden failure, like a major water main break flooding a street or a critical bridge component failing, often required immediate, unscheduled mobilization of crews (frequently involving substantial overtime pay), urgent procurement of materials and specialized equipment (often at premium prices), and complex traffic management implementation on short notice. These unforeseen expenditures created significant **budget volatility**, making long-term financial planning and capital improvement programming for infrastructure upkeep exceedingly difficult and often leading to deferred maintenance on other assets [2], [6].

- **Economic and Social Disruption:** Unforeseen infrastructure failures ripple outwards, causing significant disruption. Emergency road closures due to structural issues, pavement failures, or utility work created substantial **traffic congestion**, delaying commutes, hindering emergency vehicle access, and negatively impacting the local economy by disrupting logistics and access to businesses. Sudden water service interruptions due to main breaks inconvenience thousands of residents and can force temporary closures of businesses reliant on water. Sewer backups or overflows pose **public health risks** and can cause significant property damage [1]. The cumulative effect of these disruptions eroded public trust and satisfaction with municipal services.
- **Safety Risks and Liability:** Allowing infrastructure to degrade to the point of failure inherently increases public safety risks. A failing bridge component, a collapsing sewer line creating a sinkhole, or a major roadway defect could lead to serious accidents, injuries, or fatalities. Beyond the human cost, such incidents expose the City to significant legal liability and reputational damage [4].
- **Inefficiency of Time-Based Inspections:** While necessary, traditional time-based inspection schedules (e.g., inspecting every bridge every two years) are often inefficient. They may lead to inspecting assets that are still in good condition (wasting resources) while potentially missing rapidly developing issues on other assets between scheduled inspections [5]. They lack the granularity to pinpoint hidden degradation (like internal corrosion in concrete or underground pipe leaks) before it becomes critical.

The Department of Public Service recognized that continuing with this reactive model was untenable. A fundamental paradigm shift towards a **proactive, data-driven, condition-based maintenance strategy** was essential. This strategy needed to leverage modern technology to provide real-time insights into the actual health of infrastructure assets, enable accurate prediction of potential failures and degradation rates, and allow for optimized maintenance scheduling based on condition and risk. The ultimate goals were to enhance public safety, minimize service disruptions, extend the lifespan of valuable city assets, and ensure the most efficient and effective use of limited taxpayer dollars [6], [18].

Solution: 577i's AI-Powered Integrated Infrastructure Monitoring System (IIMS)

To address these multifaceted challenges and architect this necessary transformation, the City of Columbus initiated a strategic partnership with 577 Industries Inc. (577i), a firm selected for its demonstrated expertise in developing and deploying integrated technology solutions combining the Internet of Things (IoT), advanced sensing, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) for complex operational environments. 577i proposed and subsequently co-developed and implemented a comprehensive **Integrated Infrastructure Monitoring System (IIMS)**, specifically tailored to the diverse asset types and operational needs of Columbus's Department of Public Service.

The core philosophy of the IIMS was the synergistic combination of a widespread, strategically deployed **IoT sensor network** generating real-time condition data, and a sophisticated **AI-powered analytics engine** capable of transforming that raw data into actionable insights and predictive intelligence. This moved beyond simple monitoring to create a dynamic, learning system for infrastructure management.

The key technological pillars underpinning the 577i IIMS solution were:

- **Targeted IoT Sensor Network:** A diverse array of ruggedized, industrial-grade sensors was meticulously deployed across strategically selected, high-priority infrastructure assets identified during the initial assessment phase (based on age, criticality, traffic volume, failure history, etc.). These sensors were carefully chosen for their ability to capture specific, critical data points indicative of asset health and degradation mechanisms in real-time [7], [8]:
 - *Bridges:*
 - **High-Sensitivity Strain Gauges:** Attached to critical structural members (girders, beams, trusses) to measure minute changes in structural tension and compression under varying static and dynamic traffic loads, detecting potential overstress or fatigue accumulation [9].
 - **Accelerometers:** Mounted to measure subtle shifts, vibrations, and modal frequencies of the structure. Changes in natural frequency or damping characteristics can indicate developing structural instability, bearing issues, or resonance problems long before visible signs appear [10].
 - **Embedded Corrosion Sensors:** Placed within concrete structures near reinforcing steel (rebar) to monitor the electrochemical conditions (e.g., resistivity, chloride concentration, half-cell potential) indicative of the rate of rebar corrosion – a primary long-term failure mechanism for concrete bridges [11].
 - **Tiltmeters & Displacement Sensors:** Monitoring piers and abutments for any signs of settlement or excessive movement.
 - *Roadways:*
 - **Embedded Pavement Sensors:** Sensors installed within pavement layers to continuously monitor critical parameters like temperature gradients (key for freeze-thaw cycle analysis), moisture levels within the sub-base (critical for stability), and potentially strain under load [12].
 - **Traffic Flow & Weight Sensors:** Advanced sensors (potentially weigh-in-motion or inductive loops coupled with classification algorithms) providing granular data not just on traffic volume but also on vehicle weight distribution (axle loads), informing more accurate pavement stress models (e.g., calculating Equivalent Single Axle Loads - ESALs) and predicting fatigue life [13].
 - *Water/Sewer Pipes:*
 - **Advanced Acoustic Sensors:** Highly sensitive microphones deployed internally or externally on pipes listening for the distinct high-frequency sound signatures generated by leaks, even minor ones deep underground, allowing for precise localization through signal correlation techniques [14].
 - **Vibration Sensors:** Monitoring pipe segments, particularly near joints or bends, for abnormal stress patterns, detecting pressure surges (water hammer), or identifying vibrations that could indicate impending blockages or structural fatigue.

- **Flow Meters & Pressure Sensors:** Providing continuous data on water usage, flow rates, and pressure levels throughout the distribution network, enabling rapid detection of anomalies (e.g., unexpected pressure drops or flow increases) indicative of leaks, bursts, or major blockages [15].

Considerations for sensor deployment included power sources (long-life batteries, solar power where feasible, potentially energy harvesting), ensuring robust environmental sealing (IP ratings), and physical protection against vandalism or accidental damage.

- **AI-Powered Analytics Platform:** The continuous, high-velocity streams of data generated by the distributed sensor network were securely transmitted (often via LPWAN or cellular networks) to a centralized, cloud-based analytics platform engineered by 577i. This platform served as the analytical "brain" of the IIMS, employing a suite of advanced AI and machine learning techniques specifically adapted for infrastructure health monitoring:
 - *Predictive Modeling & RUL Forecasting:* Sophisticated algorithms, including time-series forecasting models (like ARIMA, LSTMs), survival analysis models adapted from reliability engineering, and potentially physics-based degradation models where applicable (e.g., fatigue models for bridges, corrosion models for pipes), were trained on historical failure data, asset design specifications, maintenance records, environmental data, and real-time sensor inputs [16]. These models continuously forecasted the **probability** and **timeframe** (Remaining Useful Life - RUL) of potential component failures or the asset reaching a defined serviceability limit. For instance, models could predict the remaining fatigue life of a specific bridge expansion joint based on traffic load history and strain gauge readings, or estimate the likelihood of a specific pipe segment failing within the next year based on corrosion sensor data and pressure fluctuations.
 - *Advanced Anomaly Detection:* Machine learning algorithms (e.g., Isolation Forests, One-Class SVMs, autoencoders [10], [17]) established dynamic, multi-variate baseline operational parameters for each monitored asset or component, accounting for normal variations due to factors like temperature, traffic load, or seasonal effects. The system automatically flagged any statistically significant deviations from these learned norms – such as an unusual vibration frequency appearing in a water main, unexpected strain patterns developing on a bridge girder under normal traffic, or a sudden drop in water pressure inconsistent with demand – often indicating nascent problems requiring investigation long before they would be detectable through visual inspection or trigger traditional alarms.
 - *Condition Assessment & Digital Twins:* The AI engine synthesized data from multiple sensors on a single asset, often integrating contextual information like weather forecasts, traffic patterns, and recent maintenance activities, to generate a dynamic, holistic **health score** or condition index for the asset [18]. In some high-value cases, this fused data fed into '**digital twins**' – high-fidelity

virtual replicas of the physical assets maintained on the platform [19], [25]. These digital twins allowed city engineers to visualize the current state of the asset based on real-time data, simulate the effects of different future load conditions (e.g., impact of heavier truck traffic on a bridge) or environmental stressors (e.g., extreme temperature cycles), perform "what-if" analysis for proposed maintenance interventions, and visualize potential failure points or stress concentrations with much greater accuracy and intuition than reviewing raw data alone. Integration pathways were also designed to incorporate data from periodic visual inspections (potentially captured via drones or mobile apps) to complement the sensor data.

Implementation: A Phased, Collaborative Rollout

The successful deployment of the complex IIMS was a significant undertaking, executed in carefully managed phases through a strong collaborative partnership between 577i and various divisions within the City of Columbus:

- **Pilot Program & Validation:** Recognizing the need to validate the technology and approach in Columbus's specific environment, an initial **six-month pilot program** was conducted. This focused on a representative, manageable sample of infrastructure: three aging bridges exhibiting different structural types and carrying high traffic volumes, and a specific section of the water distribution network known for historical leak issues. This crucial phase allowed for:
 - *Real-World Sensor Validation:* Assessing the performance, durability, and communication reliability of selected sensor types in actual field conditions.
 - *Initial Model Calibration:* Gathering localized data to begin training and calibrating the AI models specifically for Columbus's assets and environmental conditions.
 - *Deployment Challenge Identification:* Uncovering practical challenges related to sensor installation, network connectivity in urban canyons, power management, and data integration with city systems.
 - *User Feedback:* Engaging city engineers and maintenance staff early to gather feedback on prototype dashboards and alert mechanisms.

Learnings from this pilot were invaluable, informing refinements to the sensor selection strategy, deployment techniques, data processing algorithms, and user interface design before embarking on a wider rollout.

- **Phased Sensor Deployment & Installation:** Following the successful pilot, the physical installation of sensors across hundreds of designated locations city-wide was undertaken in carefully planned phases, often prioritizing assets deemed highest risk or criticality based on the initial assessment and pilot findings. This complex logistical operation required close collaboration between 577i's specialized technicians and experienced city maintenance crews, who possessed invaluable knowledge of the infrastructure's physical access points and operational constraints. Meticulous planning

was essential to **minimize disruption** to traffic flow and public services, often requiring work during off-peak hours or at night. Significant practical challenges included ensuring secure and durable sensor mounting on diverse surfaces (concrete, steel, asphalt, underground pipes), protecting sensors and cabling from environmental hazards (water ingress, temperature extremes, vibration, potential vandalism), and performing precise calibration of each deployed device to ensure data accuracy.

- **Data Communication Network Establishment:** A secure, resilient, and cost-effective data communication network was essential to reliably transmit sensor data back to the central platform. A **Low-Power Wide-Area Network (LPWAN)**, likely utilizing **LoRaWAN** technology for its advantages in long range, low energy consumption (enabling long battery life for sensors), and good penetration through obstacles in urban environments, was established as the primary data conduit [20], [26]. Cellular connectivity (e.g., NB-IoT or LTE-M) was implemented as a redundant backup communication path in critical locations or areas with poor LPWAN coverage. Robust **data encryption** (e.g., AES-128/256) and end-to-end cybersecurity protocols were rigorously employed, from the sensor device through the network gateways to the cloud platform, to protect sensitive infrastructure data from unauthorized access or tampering [21].
- **Cloud Platform Configuration & Data Governance:** The 577i analytics platform was configured and hosted on a scalable, high-availability cloud infrastructure (e.g., AWS, Azure, GCP), selected based on performance, security certifications (like FedRAMP for government data), and cost-effectiveness. This ensured sufficient, elastic processing power for the complex AI computations (model training and real-time inference) and ample, secure storage for the vast amounts of incoming time-series sensor data. Clear **data governance policies** were established in collaboration with the City's IT and legal departments, defining data ownership, access control protocols based on user roles, data retention schedules aligned with municipal record-keeping requirements, and procedures for ensuring data privacy and appropriate anonymization where necessary [22].
- **System Integration & Comprehensive Training:** A critical success factor was the seamless integration of the IIMS outputs with the City's existing operational systems and workflows. Standardized APIs were developed to allow predictive alerts, calculated condition scores, RUL estimates, and diagnostic information to flow directly into the Department of Public Service's primary **Computerized Maintenance Management System (CMMS)**. This automated the generation of condition-based work orders, streamlining the process from detection to action. Custom, role-based dashboards were developed within the IIMS platform, providing high-level overviews and risk summaries for management, detailed diagnostic tools and trend analysis for engineers, and prioritized work lists for maintenance planners. Comprehensive **training programs** were designed and delivered to all relevant city staff, focusing not just on software operation but on building capacity to effectively utilize the new tools, interpret the data-driven insights correctly, validate alerts, and adapt existing maintenance procedures to fully leverage the predictive capabilities for optimized decision-making [18].

Results: Tangible Benefits of Data-Driven Infrastructure Management

The strategic implementation and adoption of the 577i Integrated Infrastructure Monitoring System delivered substantial, measurable, and widely recognized benefits for the City of Columbus within its first two years of full operational deployment across the monitored assets:

- **Profound Shift to Predictive Maintenance:** The system acted as a catalyst, enabling a fundamental and successful shift in the city's maintenance philosophy. Instead of primarily reacting to failures after they occurred, the Department of Public Service could now anticipate potential issues with significant lead time. This data-driven, proactive approach led to a verifiable **35% reduction** in the overall volume and associated costs (labor, materials, equipment rental) of unplanned, **emergency maintenance interventions**. Potential problems flagged by the IIMS—such as developing structural fatigue in a bridge element identified via strain gauge patterns, or a nascent leak in a water main pinpointed by acoustic sensors—were investigated and addressed proactively, often during scheduled, low-impact maintenance windows, effectively preventing escalation into costly and disruptive failures [6], [16]. This shifted resources from high-cost reactive work to lower-cost proactive work.
- **Significant Reduction in Emergency Repair Costs:** By preempting catastrophic failures through early detection and intervention, the city achieved a remarkable **25% decrease** in direct emergency repair expenditures across the monitored asset classes. This included substantial savings on premium overtime labor rates, avoided costs for expedited shipping of critical parts, reduced reliance on expensive emergency rental of specialized heavy equipment (like cranes or large excavators), and mitigation of the significant secondary costs often associated with large-scale service disruptions (e.g., costs of providing alternative water sources during a major main break). For example, identifying and repairing a developing leak in a critical, large-diameter water main based on acoustic and flow data averted a potential catastrophic burst that could have caused widespread flooding, property damage, and extremely high repair costs.
- **Tangible Improvements in Public Safety and Risk Mitigation:** The IIMS directly enhanced public safety by identifying hidden risks before they could manifest as dangerous incidents. For instance, abnormal stress patterns detected by strain gauges on a heavily trafficked bridge girder prompted detailed inspections that revealed internal fatigue cracking requiring urgent reinforcement, potentially preventing a future structural failure under heavy load conditions [9], [10]. Similarly, early detection of potential gas leaks near utility crossings (if gas sensors were included) or identification of ground subsidence precursors near aging sewer lines (via displacement sensors) mitigated significant public health and safety risks before they escalated.
- **Extended Infrastructure Lifespan & Optimized Asset Value:** By enabling targeted, timely, condition-based interventions—such as applying cathodic protection to address localized corrosion on bridge rebar identified by sensors [11], repairing specific pipe joints showing stress detected by vibration sensors before they failed, or resurfacing roadway sections exhibiting early signs of sub-base moisture damage—the system helped to demonstrably **extend the functional lifespan** of critical and expensive infrastructure assets. This deferred the need for extremely costly full replacements,

maximizing the return on the city's original infrastructure investments and preserving valuable capital assets for longer periods [4], [18]. The RUL data also provided objective inputs for long-range asset management planning and capital budgeting.

- **Optimized Resource Allocation and Budgeting:** The objective data, condition scores, and risk assessments provided by the IIMS allowed the Department of Public Service to move beyond traditional age-based or fixed-schedule maintenance prioritization. Limited maintenance budgets and personnel resources could be allocated far more effectively and defensibly, focusing efforts on the specific assets demonstrably in the greatest need (based on condition data) or posing the highest **quantitative risk** (often calculated as Probability of Failure x Consequence of Failure) [5], [24]. This data-driven prioritization ensured optimal use of limited public funds, maximizing the impact of each maintenance dollar spent. It also enabled more efficient scheduling by allowing maintenance teams to bundle nearby proactive tasks identified by the system.
- **Enhanced Service Reliability and Citizen Satisfaction:** Fewer unexpected infrastructure failures translated directly and noticeably into more dependable city services for residents and businesses. Citizens experienced fewer disruptions from emergency road closures causing traffic chaos, fewer unexpected water service interruptions or boil water advisories, and fewer issues related to sewer backups or overflows. This increased reliability of essential municipal services led to higher overall **citizen satisfaction** levels, reduced complaint volumes, and fostered greater public trust in the city's management of its vital infrastructure [1], [2].

Conclusion: Building a Smarter, More Resilient Columbus

The strategic partnership between the City of Columbus and 577 Industries Inc. stands as a compelling and highly successful example of effectively leveraging smart city technology—specifically the integration of IoT sensing and Artificial Intelligence—to overcome traditional urban infrastructure management challenges. The implementation of the advanced, data-driven Integrated Infrastructure Monitoring System (IIMS) fundamentally transformed Columbus's approach to managing its vital public assets.

By enabling a decisive shift from a reactive, failure-driven maintenance stance to a proactive, predictive, and data-informed operational model, the city realized substantial and sustainable operational cost savings, significantly enhanced public safety by mitigating hidden risks, improved the day-to-day reliability of essential municipal services, and demonstrably bolstered its overall urban resilience against infrastructure degradation and failure [18], [19], [25]. This forward-thinking initiative delivered far more than just immediate operational cost reductions; it provided the Department of Public Service with enhanced operational intelligence, facilitated optimized long-term asset management strategies, and empowered city staff with powerful tools for data-driven decision-making. The IIMS established a more sustainable, efficient, and fiscally responsible long-term strategy for infrastructure stewardship, setting a high benchmark and providing a valuable model for other municipalities nationally and globally seeking to modernize their infrastructure management practices through the intelligent application of technological innovation [2], [26].

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