

Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

U.S. Senator Amy Klobuchar

Environment and Public Works Committee Hearing on Improving the Federal Bridge Program

September 10, 2008

Thank you, Madame Chairman, for holding this important and timely hearing. I want to convey a warm welcome to my Minnesota colleague, Congressman Jim Oberstar, who, as Chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is a leader on these issues and a strong advocate for investment in infrastructure.

Jim's dad and my grandpa were both from Northern Minnesota, home of our state's iron mines. There, "strong" means boisterous and loud, with a lot of gritted teeth.

I also want to take a moment to thank you, Chairman Boxer, for the support you and the Committee have given me and the state of Minnesota following the bridge collapse and throughout the process leading up to my introduction of S. 3338, which I brought to the Senate with Senator Durbin, and which is the subject of today's hearing.

Here's a picture of the bridge after it fell down on August 1, 2007. As I said many times after that terrible day, a bridge in America shouldn't just fall down. This bridge carried eight lanes of highway. It was six blocks from my house, the bridge I drove my 13-year-old daughter over every day.

I am pleased to share with the Committee that great progress has been made on rebuilding the I-35W Bridge. In fact, a new bridge already spans the river.

It's expected to open by the end of next week [*well ahead of schedule*], when cars and trucks will again be crossing the Mississippi River on a newly-constructed 35W bridge.

We must still get to the bottom of why this enormous bridge suddenly fell down into the Mississippi River.

It didn't happen because of an earthquake or a barge collision. Something went terribly wrong and we need to get answers.

Evidence is accumulating that the bridge's condition had been deteriorating for years and that it had been a subject of growing concern within the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

This wasn't a bridge over troubled waters; it was a troubled bridge over waters.

Still, as a former prosecutor, I know we must wait until all the facts and evidence are in before we reach a verdict. We will need to be patient as the investigation continues.

Mark Rosenker, chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board, said last month that the NTSB investigation is nearing completion and that a final report should be ready for public release within a couple of months.

Chairman Rosenker also said that photographs of the gusset plates, which were one-half-inch thick and warped, were stressed by the weight of the bridge, and may have been a key indicator to the dangerous state of the I-35.

We look forward to the NTSB report – to give us definitive answers for why this bridge suddenly collapsed, but also to provide guidance so we can prevent anything like this from happening again.

Finally, the bridge collapse in Minnesota has shown that America needs to come to grips with broader questions about our deteriorating infrastructure. The Minnesota bridge disaster shocked Americans into a realization of how important it is to invest in safe, sound infrastructure.

As if we didn't already know, Minnesotans got a reminder only a few months after the 35W bridge collapse.

Because we learned that another bridge – a bridge of similar design – was inspected and found to be in serious trouble. That bridge – in the heart of downtown St. Cloud, a major regional city in central Minnesota – is now closed, with plans to replace it.

Unfortunately, it took a disaster to put the issue of infrastructure investment squarely on the national agenda.

According to the Federal Highway Administration, more than 25 percent of the nation's 600,000 bridges are either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

74,000 of these bridges are structurally deficient.

In my home state of Minnesota, the U.S. Department of Transportation indicates that 1,579 bridges are considered structurally deficient.

Of these, there are 160 structurally deficient bridges on federal roadways in Minnesota.

Of that 160, 40 are fracture critical – meaning that the failure of one of the bridge's key components would result in the catastrophic failure of the bridge.

As you can see by this map, there is virtually no way to drive in our out of my state without driving on a bridge deemed structurally deficient by the U.S. Department of Transportation. And, I suspect the same is true for the states that my colleagues in this room represent as well.

When the average age of a bridge in this country is 43 years and 25 percent of all American bridges are in need of serious repair or replacement, it is time to act.

I am looking forward to today's testimony from **Katherine [Sig-er-ood]**, managing director at the Government Accountability Office. The GAO study being released today raises several issues regarding the federal Highway Bridge Program.

First, the Program has expanded from improving deficient bridges to include funding criteria that make nearly all bridges eligible.

Second, states are able to transfer bridge program funds to other transportation projects.

Third, there may be disincentives for states to reduce their inventories of deficient bridges, since doing so would reduce their federal bridge funds.

Finally, GAO noted that the long term trend is more bridges in need of repair and the cost of repair rising as well. In other words, the Highway Bridge Fund is not fiscally sustainable.

Just last week Transportation Secretary Peters announced that the federal Highway Trust Fund will not be able to meet its obligations to state road and bridge building projects.

The issue of how to provide a long term fix for financing bridge and road projects will be taken up in the next Congress when we authorize a new Transportation bill.

Meanwhile, we have a crisis to deal with today – and that is the safety and security of all of these bridges.

We have tried to pass legislation three separate times in 2008 containing emergency funding for the Highway Trust Fund—most recently as part of the tax extenders package. Unfortunately, the legislation has become entangled in disagreements over energy policy.

I hope we can fix this funding problem very soon because Americans shouldn't have to question the quality of the bridges and roads they use everyday.

In the coming years, hard decisions will need to be made about reordering our national priorities so the federal government can properly assist states and local communities with the funding necessary to ensure a safe, solid transportation infrastructure.

But we need to get started now. The Minnesota bridge disaster shocked Americans into a realization of how important it is to invest in safe, sound infrastructure.

That is why just before the August recess, Senator Durbin and I introduced S. 3338, the "National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act of 2008," the bill Congressman Oberstar successfully authored and moved through the House.

This legislation would require the Federal Highway Administration and state transportation departments to develop plans to begin repairing and replacing bridges that pose the greatest risk to the public.

It would also require the Federal Highway Administration to develop new bridge inspection standards and procedures that use the best technology available.

Because some states have been transferring their bridge repair funds to highway maintenance programs to use for wildflower planting or road construction, this bill would also ensure that federal bridge funds can only be transferred when a state no longer has bridges on the National Highway System that are eligible for replacement.

Finally, it would authorize an additional \$1 billion for the reconstruction of structurally deficient bridges that are part of the national highway system.

This is just a start. But it is a good start – if the Senate will pass it and the president will sign it. And I am hopeful that it will get us headed in the right direction for further action.

Thank you again, Chairman Boxer, for holding this hearing and for your leadership on this issue. I know we can make our bridges safer.

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