

**Statement Of
The Honorable James L. Oberstar
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
Hearing On
“Structurally Deficient Bridges in the United States”
September 5, 2007**

The tragic collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis demonstrates the need to make a commitment to invest in the maintenance and major reconstruction our nation's infrastructure. Many facilities are being stretched to the limit of their design life and beyond.

Of the 594,101 bridges in the National Bridge Inventory, 26.2 percent of America's bridges—more than one in four—are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete.

According to the Department of Transportation (DOT), more than \$65 billion could be invested immediately in a cost-beneficial way to replace or otherwise address existing bridge deficiencies.

One area where strong federal leadership is required is the reconstruction of bridges on the National Highway System (NHS).

The NHS is a 162,000-mile highway network that consists of the 46,747-mile Interstate System, the Strategic Highway Network for military mobilizations, and other major highways. While the NHS makes up only 4.1 percent of total U.S. mileage, it carries 45 percent of vehicle miles traveled, including 75 percent of heavy truck traffic and 90 percent of tourist traffic.

Of the 116,172 bridges on the NHS (including more than 55,000 Interstate System bridges), 6,175 NHS bridges are structurally deficient. Almost one-half of these structurally deficient NHS bridges are bridges on the Interstate Highway System (2,830 structurally deficient Interstate System bridges).

According to DOT, the current NHS bridge investment backlog is estimated at \$32.1 billion. This includes \$19.1 billion for the Interstate Highway System bridge backlog.

Addressing the needs of bridges on the NHS is critical to public safety, regional and national mobility and economic competitiveness. It demands a national response.

Many of us have recognized the importance of making these critical infrastructure investments, however, far too many of the nation's leaders have taken the path of least resistance and have ignored this looming crisis.

To begin to address our nation's infrastructure crisis, I have proposed the National Highway System Bridge Reconstruction Initiative. This proposal provides dedicated funding to States to repair, rehabilitate, and replace structurally deficient bridges on the National Highway System.

In short, my proposal injects accountability into our bridge inspection, repair and replacement by providing a data-driven, performance-based approach to systematically addressing structurally deficient bridges on our nation's core highway network.

This proposal is not “business as usual”. Business as usual would be to commission a study, develop a strategic plan, and find a reason not to address the problem. It does not take a plan to address this urgent need, it takes leadership and action. That is what my proposal does.

To date, I have received letters of support for my proposal from a broad range of governmental, business, industry, and highway user organizations, including:

U.S. Chamber of Commerce
The Transportation Construction Coalition
Associated General Contractors
American Road and Transportation Builders Association
National Construction Alliance (Laborers, Operating Engineers and Carpenters.)
American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials
American Highway Users Alliance
American Bus Association
Association of Equipment Manufactures
Associated Equipment Distributors
National Asphalt Pavement Association
National Ready Mixed Concrete Association

Although Secretary Peters, in her written testimony, states that “the I-35W bridge collapse was both a tragedy and a wake-up call to the country”, she states that there is no “transportation infrastructure ‘safety’ crisis” and “it is inaccurate to conclude that the Nation’s transportation infrastructure is subject to catastrophic failure.”

Madam Secretary, the I-35W bridge collapse was a catastrophic failure. Although we do not know the cause of the collapse, we do know that more than 73,000 bridges are structurally deficient, including 6,175 bridges on the National Highway System. We have maps (produced by your Department) that show where every one of those bridges is located. Your Department has identified a backlog of more than \$32 billion of NHS bridge investments that are cost-beneficial that could be made today. Are we to have a “bake sale for bridges” to fund this bridge investment backlog?

I have proposed a Bridge Initiative to specifically address these structurally deficient NHS bridges. Regrettably, the Secretary never addresses (nor even mentions) my proposal. She suggests more of the same one-note surface transportation policy of this administration: tolling (or congestion pricing) is the solution. Let us toll these bridges (preferably with private partners) and all of our infrastructure problems will be solved. She never explains how tolling will be administered to ensure that the worst bridge safety problems are addressed first, or how we will ensure that tolling proceeds will be used for needed bridge reconstruction.

The Secretary does call for a data-driven, performance-based approach to highway infrastructure investment. I believe my proposal does just that. I ask the Secretary, in her oral statement, to specifically address the four elements of my proposal:



1. The Initiative will significantly improve Bridge Inspection Requirements.

The Initiative requires the Federal Highway Administration and the States to significantly improve and develop consistent, uniform processes and standards for the inspection of structurally deficient bridges and inspector training.

Do you oppose efforts to significantly improve bridge inspection requirements?

2. The Initiative establishes an NHS Bridge Reconstruction Trust Fund and provides dedicated funding to finance the repair, rehabilitation, and replacement of structurally deficient NHS bridges.

Do you oppose efforts to provide a dedicated funding stream and Trust Fund to reconstruct these 6,175 bridges?

3. The Initiative distributes funds based on public safety and need by requiring the U.S. Department of Transportation to develop an administrative formula for distributing all funds.

Do you oppose efforts to distribute these funds based on public safety and need?

4. The Initiative provides accountability by prohibiting any earmarks by Congress, the administration, or the States and requires the National Academy of Sciences to independently review the State and FHWA prioritization of structurally deficient bridges for reconstruction.

Do you oppose efforts to prohibit all earmarks (Congressional, Administration, or State) and require an independent review of the prioritization of projects?

While the terrible events of August 1, 2007 have served as a wake-up call for many policymakers and leaders around the country, others have failed to understand the lessons to be learned from this tragedy. Sometimes, political leaders have to make hard choices, and some of those choices involve funding priorities. We have an opportunity to lead, and to make a commitment to upgrading our infrastructure so that events like this will not occur again.

I have asked Subcommittee Chairman DeFazio to hold a second hearing on these issues (specifically bridge inspection and technology issues) within the next two weeks. I hope to introduce a bipartisan bill to authorize the NHS Bridge Reconstruction Initiative subsequent to the second hearing and expect that the Committee will consider this legislation in the first week of October.

Madam Secretary, I ask you to address each of the four elements of my proposal – which elements does the administration support? Which does it oppose? I think it is only fair to the Members of this Committee, the public, and particularly, the citizens of Minnesota, that we know where you stand on each of these issues.

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