

Testimony of

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Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works  
September 10, 2008

Madam Chairperson and distinguished Committee Members, thank you for the opportunity to testify on this issue that is crucial to the safety and security of American families. I speak today on behalf of the US Public Interest Research Group, a national federation of nonpartisan, non-profit state-based public interest advocates, and the many other organizations that support this legislation, including the Transportation for America coalition, an alliance of national membership groups focused on building a modernized infrastructure and healthy communities where people can live, work, and play.

As the latest wave of dangerous storms crashing into our coasts have reminded us, we as a country are only strong and safe when our national infrastructure is sound and in a state of good repair. For that reason we firmly believe that a federal highway dollar is best spent on preservation and maintenance rather than building new capacity. We urge the committee to support this legislation and to focus federal funding on our nation's significant backlog of aging and crumbling infrastructure.

The height of new bridge construction occurred from 1956 to 1971, during the early building phase of the Interstate Highway System. Therefore, many of the bridges that Americans travel on everyday are reaching a critical age at the same time. According to a needs assessment from the Department of Transportation, the existing bridge investment backlog on the National Highway System is over \$65 billion.

Last year, America saw the horror of the Minnesota I-35 W bridge collapse, which sent drivers plummeting to their death into the Mississippi River. One year later, it is important to understand the systematic causes of that tragedy in order to avoid future disasters.

There is no organized lobby that pressures state officials for bridge repair. On the contrary, well connected developers and road builders lobby aggressively for wider lanes, new branch roads, and additional off ramps. Builders often prefer lucrative contracts to pour concrete and lay steel for new highways rather than the uncertainty of relatively complex and labor-intensive restoration and repair. Meanwhile, elected officials find it all too easy to defer preventative maintenance that is scarcely noticed and rarely celebrated by the voters.

Over the last two decades, State Departments of Transportation have received vastly increased flexibility to shift funds between federal programs to fulfill their state transportation plans. The Highway Bridge Program is the primary source of federal funds for highway bridge replacement, reconstruction, and capital maintenance. States can, however, if they wish, transfer or “flex” up to 50% of their federal bridge funds to non-bridge programs. During the last five years, most states diverted that money into new projects, diluting the intention of the program. In fact, federal highway data shows that thirty-six states transferred more money out of bridge repair accounts than into them over that span.

Compounding the problem, federal funds are doled out based on formulas that often reward deferred maintenance. States receive funding based on their outstanding costs for replacing deficient bridges, but there is little accountability to ensure that states use the money for this purpose. By deferring maintenance and allowing a bridge to deteriorate to the point of replacement, states can tap into more readily available federal capital funds – albeit at a much greater total cost to taxpayers.

The National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act would be a strong step in the right direction. The legislation requires that State Departments of Transportation address all bridges on the National Highway System that have a sufficiency rating below 50 on a scale of 1 to 100 before being eligible to transfer federal bridge funds into other programs. This common sense solution ensures that states address those bridges that are in worse condition than the I-35 W Bridge before diverting bridge funds into other projects.

The legislation also infuses more accountability into the national bridge repair and replacement program by ensuring that investments are based on priorities, like safety and mobility, rather than politics.

Next session, this committee will be called upon to debate and write much of the next surface transportation funding authorization. In order to revamp our

transportation system for the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, “fix it first” policies and accountability for spending must be prioritized.

Unless we change the way that America finances bridge repair, we remain doomed to repeat mistakes of the past. The bridge collapse in Minnesota should serve as a wake-up call. We urge this committee to embrace an approach to highway spending that prioritizes maintenance and repair of our existing roadways and bridges. Our country can no longer afford the cost of inaction and misplaced priorities as our bridges continue to age and deteriorate. Please support The National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act.

Thank you once again for this opportunity.



Smart Growth America – Reconnecting America – Surface Transportation Policy Project  
PolicyLink – National Housing Conference - US Public Interest Research Group - National Association of City  
Transportation Officials – America Bikes – National Association of Realtors National Resources Defense Council – Apollo  
Alliance – LOCUS: Responsible Real Estate Developers and Investors  
Action! For Regional Equity – Transit for Livable Communities – American Public Health Association

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The United States Senate  
Committee on Environment and Public Works

Sept 10, 2008

Dear Senator,

One year after the tragic collapse of the I-35 W Bridge in Minneapolis, our country's bridges remain in critical condition. **We strongly urge you to support S. 3338, The National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act.**

The unmet needs of our nation's aging transportation infrastructure endanger the safety and security of American families. While billions in federal funds are spent annually on new highway projects and lane expansion, our existing assets have been left behind. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, approximately 74,000 bridges in this country are classified as structurally deficient.

This legislation, which passed the House in July, is an important first step towards addressing our national infrastructure crisis. The bill authorizes dedicated funding for bridge repairs throughout the country and provides minimum inspection standards. The bill also requires that state Departments of Transportation address bridges on the National Highway System that are in worse condition than the I-35 W Bridge before being eligible to transfer federal bridge funds into other projects.

The tragedy in Minnesota should serve as a wake-up call for this Congress, which must embrace an approach to highway spending that prioritizes maintenance and repair of our existing roadways over new capacity. Our country can no longer afford the cost of inaction as our bridges continue to age and deteriorate. **Please support S. 3338, The National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act.**

Thank you,

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