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House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
“Addressing the Nation’s Critical Bridge Needs”
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Chairman Oberstar, Representative Mica, and other members of the Committee, thank you for inviting the American Road & Transportation Builders Association (ARTBA) to take part in your discussion of the status of the nation’s bridges. I am William Cox, president of Corman Construction, Inc., a multi-disciplinary contracting company based in Annapolis Junction, Maryland. I also serve as vice chairman at-large of the American Road & Transportation Builders Association.

Throughout my professional career, I have been intricately involved in bridge construction. Among the projects my company has worked on are: the Historic Market Street Bridge in Wilmington, Delaware; the Harpers Ferry Bridge in West Virginia; the new Woodrow Wilson Bridge between Virginia and Maryland; and we are currently working on the Frederick Douglass Bridge in Washington, D.C.

ARTBA, established in 1902, has over 5,000 member firms and member public agencies from across the nation. They belong to ARTBA because they support strong federal investment in transportation improvement programs to meet the needs and demands of the American public and business community. The industry we represent generates more than \$200 billion annually in U.S. economic activity and sustains 2.5 million American jobs.

ARTBA has long been a proponent of a robust federal bridge program because of the unique and essential role bridges play in helping facilitate the efficient movement of people and goods throughout the nation. I would like to share with members of the Committee a brief excerpt from ARTBA’s long-standing bridge policy, which is relevant to today’s discussion:

“ARTBA encourages Congress to significantly increase federal funding for bridge repair and replacement and continue discretionary funding for high-cost bridge projects. Proper investment should be made on individual projects to ensure that the highest quality materials and state-of-the-art technologies are used on federal-aid bridges. ARTBA believes the federal government should establish uniform bridge inspection standards so that bridge funding priorities can be established. The choice between whether to rehabilitate or replace a structurally deficient bridge should be based on careful inspections and detailed cost comparisons that consider safety, future maintenance, environmental and social impact, and operational costs. Such studies, design services and bridge inspections should utilize professionally qualified engineers.

“We also encourage the federal government to take the lead in developing and coordinating a national information system that would catalogue and share technical experiences and expertise in the areas of bridge repair and rehabilitation.”

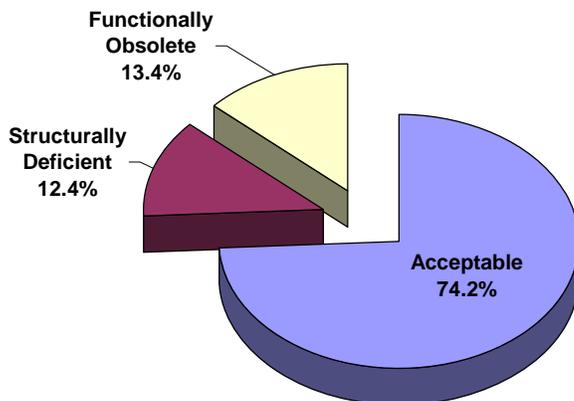
While ARTBA welcomes today’s discussion of the nation’s enormous bridge needs and how best to address them, we deeply regret the circumstances that led to this hearing. Bridges can be rebuilt and roadways repaired, but lives touched by tragedy can never be wholly repaired. The entire ARTBA membership offers its condolences and prayers to families, including those in the road and bridge builder community, who lost loved ones or were injured by the I-35 W bridge collapse.

Last month’s tragic event serves as a stark reminder that our transportation systems are an integral part of the American way of life and are all too often taken for granted. The fact that all levels of government are not investing enough to maintain existing transportation facilities, let alone meet growing demands, should come as no surprise. The U.S. Department of Transportation continues to report vast gaps between the amount of investment needed to maintain surface transportation system conditions and performance and the level of funding currently provided. In addition, reports from the Texas Transportation Institute and other institutions repeatedly quantify growing traffic congestion. These empirical statements underscore what anyone who travels on the nation’s roadways, bridges, airways, and rails already knows—the U.S. transportation system is not keeping pace with the demands being placed on it and the situation is getting worse.

Bridge Conditions

In recent years, state and local transportation departments have been making a concerted effort to improve bridge conditions in the U.S. In 1997, 20 percent of the value of construction work on highways involved bridge repairs or replacements. Today, this share had risen to 30 percent. As a result, the backlog of deficient bridges has been reduced significantly. In 1996, there were 101,518 structurally deficient bridges and 81,208 functionally obsolete bridges on U.S. highways, for a total 182,726 deficient bridges. This represented 31.4 percent of all bridges in the U.S. In 2006, there were 73,764 structurally deficient bridges and 80,226 functionally obsolete bridges for a total of 153,990. This represented 25.8 percent of bridges.

One Quarter of U.S. Highway Bridges Need Repair or Replacement



Source: Federal Highway Administration, National Bridge Inventory, 2006

But much more investment is needed to bring the nation's bridges into good repair. 153,990 bridges still need repairs or replacement to be rated acceptable. While deficient bridges are generally considered safe to use, the possibility of failure always exists—as the fatal collapse of the I-35 bridge in Minneapolis amply illustrates. According to the U.S. DOT 2006 Conditions & Performance (C&P) report, “\$65.2 billion could be invested immediately in a cost-beneficial fashion to replace or otherwise address currently existing bridge deficiencies.”¹ This is essentially the cost to do all of the bridge work in the United States where the benefit of the project outweighs the cost.

It is important to note the investment requirements detailed in the C&P report are in constant 2004 dollars. As such, any future investment decisions must factor into consideration the dramatic growth in construction material prices that has occurred in the last three years. Failing to recognize the increased cost of materials like steel, aggregate and cement will ensure the purchasing power of any investments directed at bridge deficiencies is diluted and does not produce the desired results. Since 2003, highway, street and bridge material prices have increased 42 percent. During the same time period inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, increased about 10 percent. As such, the inflation-adjusted investment requirements in the C&P report should take into consideration increased material costs, at least in the short-term, which typically account for 45 percent of a project's overall cost.

Mr. Chairman, the nation has vast unmet bridge needs that are well documented and irrefutable. The U.S., however, is not just suffering from a bridge crisis; it is suffering from a surface transportation crisis. We need to dramatically upgrade the nation's bridges and its roadways and public transportation facilities. The U.S. transportation network is a holistic system and we must begin the process of addressing all of these needs in a meaningful way as soon as possible.

Immediate Federal Leadership Needed

The collapse of the I-35 W bridge demonstrates the tragic consequences that can occur from failing to correct critical infrastructure needs. This, however, is not just an isolated, one-time event. Earlier this summer, a steam pipe exploded underneath a busy street in Manhattan. Following this nearly tragic event, New York City Deputy Mayor Dan Doctoroff appropriately characterized the nation's overall infrastructure crisis by saying, “These long-term investments are not politically popular. Somebody's got to pay for them. But what's clear, and we experienced this dramatically yesterday, is unless you make those investments now, you pay so much more in the future in terms of money, in terms of inconvenience, and tragically sometimes in terms of loss of life.”

Deteriorating bridges represent an urgent public safety threat that requires immediate action. We commend Chairman Oberstar for detailing a bold strategy to upgrade bridges on the National Highway System (NHS). As the NHS carries the vast majority of the nation's interstate commerce and NHS bridges bear 70 percent of all U.S. bridge traffic, an aggressive federal response is not only appropriate, but also is the best chance to ensure this national priority is addressed. It is clear Americans want more accountability from the federal government and the

¹ U.S. DOT. *2006 Conditions and Performance Report*. p. 7-17.

approach outlined in Chairman Oberstar's "NHS Bridge Reconstruction Initiative" is not business as usual. The concept is a targeted approach that will provide quantifiable results in a short period of time.

As I mentioned earlier, the U.S. surface transportation infrastructure network must be revamped to catch up with the increasing demands being placed upon it and to help the nation strategically prepare for the future. I commend both Chairman Oberstar and Representative Mica for their clear statements of support and advocacy for developing a long-range national strategic transportation plan. ARTBA members view a targeted federal bridge rehabilitation initiative as a logical first step toward restructuring the core federal highway and public transportation programs to address unmet needs in the 2009 reauthorization of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU). In fact, ARTBA is advocating the inclusion of a new federal program, the Critical Commerce Corridors, as part of the SAFETEA-LU reauthorization effort that is funded outside the Highway Trust Fund and dedicated to building the transportation system capacity necessary to ensure the secure and efficient movement of freight.

National Challenges Require National Solutions

A consistent theme, if not goal, in the last three federal surface transportation program reauthorization bills has been to provide increased flexibility to states in use of their federal highway funding. The argument that state and local authorities—or even elected federal representatives—know best the unique transportation challenges and needs of their area and constituents and should thus have control in directing federal highway funds can be powerful.

Sometimes, however, meeting national needs means allowing a federal role that uses funds collected from the citizenry as necessary to meet national objectives. Such as would be the case under Chairman Oberstar's bridge rehabilitation initiative. While much of the current federal highway and public transportation programs are, and should remain, regionally focused and controlled, federal surface transportation program funds must not be considered entitlements. History has demonstrated it is entirely appropriate for the federal government to direct resources toward growing needs that are clearly in the national interest.

The Interstate Highway System would never have been built if each state alone had to pay for the segments running through it. The massive reconstruction and rehabilitation of the Interstate currently necessary—and the construction and maintenance of the "Next Generation" expansion of the U.S. surface transportation system that is necessary to keep America competitive during this century—will never be done if most federal highway funding remains "flexible" or earmarked. As such, we urge all members of the Committee to support Chairman Oberstar's proposal which would address an immediate public safety threat and provide a critical foundation for a comprehensive SAFETEA-LU reauthorization in 2009 that truly addresses national transportation priorities.

No Easy Solutions

Disasters, like the Minnesota bridge collapse, can be catalysts for change and improvement. They can also resurrect age-old debates and ideological differences that perpetuate the status quo. Political will and leadership are the key to determining the ultimate outcome.

Mr. Chairman, other member of the Committee, it is easy to be against a specific action or policy initiative and/or argue for the status quo. In this particular case, however, the facts clearly demonstrate the nation is facing major transportation challenges in the short- and long-term. Existing surface transportation financing mechanisms are failing to keep pace with growing demands—not because they represent an outdated or ineffective model, but because of purely political reasons. Simply put, any meaningful effort to maintain and improve the nation's surface transportation network will require additional investment and new revenues. The fact remains, good roads and bridges cost money, but bad roads and bridges cost even more.

Following last month's tragedy in Minnesota, certain groups have put forth the same stale arguments as to why federal leadership to help rehabilitate the nation's bridges is not warranted.

They suggest that if it were not for congressionally designated spending, or earmarks, ample resources would be available to address the nation's transportation needs. While this rhetoric makes for a good media sound bite, it is not accurate. The fundamental assumption behind this assessment is that earmarked funds are not being used for highway and bridge improvements. Mr. Chairman, over 80 percent of SAFETEA-LU's high priority projects were for road and bridge improvements and many of these projects were on state transportation plans.

It has also been stated earmarks are for wasteful projects. Again, this is a stretch of the truth. My company, Corman Construction, Inc., is involved in the Woodrow Wilson Bridge Project—the largest single earmark in the 1998 surface transportation program reauthorization law. The Woodrow Wilson Bridge was one of the nation's worst bottlenecks and was a major impediment to the movement of freight and people all along the East Coast. As it nears completion, it will be one of the most successful and beneficial transportation projects in the history of the U.S. It will also be delivered on time and on budget. Two of the roadways included in the Forbes magazine 2007 list of deadliest American roads (U.S. 95 in Idaho and U.S. 93 in Arizona) received SAFETEA-LU earmarks. The bill also provides funds for the Chicago Region Environmental And Transportation Efficiency (CREATE) project that will help improve cargo movement across the nation and improve U.S. competitiveness in the global marketplace.

Furthermore, according to the U.S. DOT C&P Report, federal highway and bridge investment is \$20 billion below the amount necessary to simply maintain current roadway and bridge physical conditions and congestion levels each year. At the same time, SAFETEA-LU's high priority project program is authorized at slightly less than \$3 billion per year. As such, eliminating the vast majority of SAFETEA-LU's earmarks and allocating these funds directly to state departments of transportation would still leave federal highway and bridge investment \$17 billion short each year of the amount the U.S. DOT says is necessary to preserve the status quo.

Mr. Chairman, a second consistent, but not surprising, argument raised against upgrading the nation's NHS bridges has been criticism of proposals to generate the necessary revenues to accomplish this goal. Even though the federal motor fuels tax has been demonstrated to be the most effective and reliable method to finance transportation improvements, it continues to be used as a political wedge issue. Opponents either claim the tax is a political death sentence or that it is an antiquated model. Numerous states have increased their gas tax in recent years with little to no electoral penalties for state lawmakers. The state of Washington increased its gasoline tax by 9.5 cents per gallon in 2005 and a ballot initiative to repeal the increase was rejected later that year on a 55 to 45 vote. While any tax increase typically receives immediate opposition, the American electorate has consistently demonstrated they are willing to pay more for transportation services if they are shown how resulting revenues will be utilized and they see value in those projects.

While it is true that increasing fuel efficiency standards and alternative motor fuel will ultimately have a dilutive effect on the gasoline tax, that point is not expected to be reached for at least another decade. The House Highways and Transit Subcommittee had a hearing on this topic earlier this year and all those testifying agreed the gas tax remains the most viable and robust source of funding for transportation improvements in the short term. The only thing that is antiquated about the gasoline tax is its rate. To suggest that drivers should be contributing the same level of financial support to maintain and improve the nation's transportation network as they did 14 years ago lacks all credibility. Since that time, the population has grown, the economy has grown, the number of vehicles has grown, demands on the system have grown, and the cost of road and bridge improvements has skyrocketed. It is not the gas tax that has not kept pace, it is the contribution motorists make for the benefits they receive from the nation's surface transportation network that has fallen behind.

Mr. Chairman, as we work to address the nation's comprehensive highway, bridge and public transportation challenges, we will need to consider all viable alternatives to raise the necessary revenues. There is no silver bullet or single solution to this problem. Public-private partnerships, innovative financing, tolling, and new user fees are all part of the solution. The foundation of this financing structure, however, at least for the next decade, should continue to be the federal motor fuels tax.

Improving NHS Bridges Is A Critical First Step

Mr. Chairman, the nation's transportation challenges are not insurmountable. Ingenuity and a can do attitude—hallmarks of American society—are the keys to successfully meeting these challenges. We must utilize all available options to meet these needs and we must do so in a holistic manner that recognizes our surface transportation infrastructure network is a true system of interrelated pieces.

ARTBA believes a targeted proposal to rehabilitate the nation's National Highway System bridges is a critical first step toward achieving the necessary goal of a comprehensive national surface transportation strategy and program. The federal government has a unique leadership role to play in upgrading these structures because of their role in the nation's transportation

network and the demonstrated public safety threat that can exist. We urge all members of Congress to support Chairman Oberstar's NHS Bridge Reconstruction Initiative.

Mr. Chairman, thank you again for the opportunity to be with you today. I would be pleased to answer any questions from you or other members of the Committee.