



STATEMENT OF

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AND

PRESIDENT-ELECT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY
ENGINEERS

ON BEHALF OF

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

AND

THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY ENGINEERS

ON

STRUCTURALLY DEFICIENT BRIDGES IN THE UNITED STATES

BEFORE THE

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND
INFRASTRUCTURE

SEPTEMBER 5, 2007
WASHINGTON, DC

Good Afternoon Chairman Oberstar, Ranking Member Mica and members of the Committee. My name is Sue Miller and I am the County Engineer Freeborn County, Minnesota. Today I am representing the National Association of Counties (NACo) and National Association of County Engineers (NACE) where this year I serve as its President-elect. I want to thank the Committee for the opportunity to present a local government perspective on the status and condition of bridges.

I hope to offer some thoughts regarding the existing Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program (HBRRP) and the bridge inspection program and possible ways to improve them. Finally, County Engineers consider bridge safety to be one of our top priorities and we take this responsibility very seriously. As a former bridge inspector I supervise and certify the bridge inspections done by my staff.

Freeborn County is a small rural county in south central Minnesota bordering Iowa with a population of about 32,000. We have 176 bridges identified on the National Bridge Inventory System, of which 13 are considered structurally deficient and none are functionally obsolete. We estimate that it will take \$3.53 million to replace these 13 bridges. By comparison, my neighboring County of Fillmore, population 22,000, has 165 structurally deficient bridges of a total of 465 structures. This represents well over \$50,000,000 of needed transportation investment in today's dollars.

Freeborn County receives no federal bridge funds but gets bridge money from the State of Minnesota's bridge fund. NACo and NACE would like to determine how much of the federal bridge program funds get spent on bridges owned by local governments or even on non-federal aid bridges. We ask the Committee to request from FHWA data on what percentage of the federal bridge program goes to non-federal aid bridges in each state, it should be a minimum of 15 per cent, as well as what other federal bridge funds and Surface Transportation Program dollars by state go to county and city governments for bridge rehabilitation and replacement.

Let me indicate how important federal bridge funds are to many local governments. Unlike the federal and state governments that rely on user fees for highway funding, local governments rely primarily on property taxes or "own source revenue" to finance their bridge improvements. Raising

property taxes is often unpopular politically and from the perspective of many of our citizens see little connection between better bridges and increasing taxes. Do not leave rural local government out of increased federal funding for bridges or our rural economy will suffer because we will not be able to raise property taxes high enough to meet the needs of all the users.

I want to stress that every day even in our nation's rural areas we face situations which could result in a catastrophic collapse of one of our bridges. It was a miracle that no one was killed on the school bus involved in the I-35 collapse. In Freeborn County, or any other rural county where the majority of children are transported by buses, imagine what could happen if one of our school buses crossing local bridges daily to school was involved in a bridge collapse. I have four children riding those buses and I think about that as a mom too, not just as the county engineer.

I also think about the economic importance of bridges in rural areas. In my county, for example, renewable fuel production has emphasized how vital our transportation system is to support one of the countries leading biodiesel producers, with an annual output of 30 million gallons per year, and additionally two ethanol plants producing 105 million gallons per year. A collapsed, closed or weight posted bridge can have a tremendous negative economic impact on the agricultural, mining or logging industry in our communities. A closed or posted bridge can mean no or limited access to or from agricultural processing plant and that can have a profound impact on the economy of a rural county.

We also have some observations on the Bridge Inspection Program and the Adequacy of Training for Local Bridge Inspectors. The current regulations (23 CFR part 650) note that State DOT's are responsible for inspections for all non federal bridges regardless of ownership. However, it should be noted that some states delegate this authority to counties. The opportunity, availability and affordability of training are concerns of local agencies. In some states no HBRRP or federal funds are made available to local government for inspections. The qualifications for personnel implementing the inspection program require that the state or delegated agency must be accomplished by a licensed professional engineer and have completed the FHWA comprehensive bridge inspection training program. Many counties in some states do not have a licensed professional engineer.

I believe the education and training package maybe appropriate, but it is very costly for local government agencies, especially smaller local ones with limited staff time. Consideration of a tiered approach should be explored based on the types of bridge structure inspected, i.e. many local agencies bridges are relatively simple structures and would not require the expertise for lift, suspension, and other complex type structures. Additionally, as noted by the previsions witness, the National Highway Institute training is offered primarily to state agencies, is very costly for local agencies to afford, and since time slots are very limited, is often unavailable to locals. We would continue to encourage repackaging their training programs for local use and would recommend that this training be turned over to the Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) to develop and deploy.

This completes my testimony and I would happy to respond to any questions committee members may have.