

**Testimony for the
House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee**

Mayor R.T. Rybak

Wednesday, September 5, 2007

Chairman Oberstar, Members of the Committee, my name is R.T. Rybak and I am the Mayor of Minneapolis. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the City of Minneapolis as well as the US Conference of Mayors.

On behalf of my city and the entire state of Minnesota, please accept our heartfelt gratitude for your efforts to secure early authorization of Emergency Relief dollars to help us respond to the catastrophe of the I-35W Bridge collapse. Your dedication to do whatever it takes to come to the assistance of our community will not be forgotten.

Every day in America there are moments when millions of us cross paths without ever seeing who we are. People walk by on the sidewalk or a shopping mall without saying hello. Cars switch lanes in heavy traffic without paying attention to who is behind the other wheel. We live the same place but often don't know who we really are.

Then something happens that forces us to look up from our daily routine to see what and who is really around us.

That happened dramatically, and tragically, in Minneapolis at 6:05 p.m. on August 1, 2007.

- A marketing director whose husband and daughters had dinner waiting on the table;
- An amateur baseball player driving home to see his wife and their two young kids;
- A pregnant Somali nursing student and her little girl;
- A Cambodian woman and her son with Downs Syndrome, who were inseparable, even in death;
- A vegetable salesman from Mexico whose young family was scattered across two countries;
- A former missionary who worked in computers; and
- A veteran construction worker who loved ice fishing, hunting and peach pie.

Today they and six others are gone. Many others, including a bus filled with school children, were on the bridge but escaped alive.

All these separate lives, intersecting for one tragic moment in Minneapolis, are now woven together forever. It's during times like these that we realize we really aren't all that separate after all. We realize that in the middle of a tragedy, and every moment of every day, we all share common ground.

This should have a special resonance for those of us in government, because we provide that common ground....the services we all share: public safety, roads and bridges, public water, garbage removal, snowplowing, public housing, libraries, schools and parks.

In our roles as stewards of the common ground, we should take this lesson out of the bridge collapse in Minneapolis: **When you invest in quality government you get quality results. When you don't invest, there are consequences.**

In Minneapolis, we have invested in public safety and emergency preparedness. Minneapolis, in strong partnership with the federal government, has invested more than \$50 million on emergency preparedness in the last five years. Because of that investment, Minneapolis and all our partners were prepared to respond to the bridge collapse with professionalism, coordination and excellence.

In Minneapolis, and in cities across the nation, we have not invested as we must in roads, bridges and transit, and our lack of investment has serious consequences.

I say this as the Mayor of a city recovering from a tragedy that was not an act of God. It was a failure of man. For some time, we have known that our rates of investment have not kept pace with rising maintenance and rehabilitation needs. Rising costs for energy and oil-based products, steel and many construction materials have only added to this increased liability.

As a representative of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, I can tell you that mayors across the country have sounded the alarm about the lack of investment in infrastructure, especially transportation, long before the I-35W Bridge collapsed.

- During debate on SAFETEA-LU, the Conference and its members supported Congressional efforts to increase the federal gas tax to extend federal commitments to fund transportation infrastructure.
- Recently, the Conference endorsed this Committee's package of transportation-related initiatives that were included in the energy legislation approved last month by the House of Representatives.
- While the Conference has not addressed the issues specifically before us today, in the past we have been willing to support raising new revenues to deal with our critical transportation needs.

Mr. Chairman, on behalf of the mayors, I want to commend your personal efforts to champion provisions that bar States from using rescission orders to undermine Congressional commitments help cities address local bridge needs.

As we start the debate on the legislation before this Committee today, I would like to draw your attention to concerns among the mayors about practices that undermine local priorities.

- Mayors know that most states, including my own, are not raising new revenues for transportation. Your own federal data demonstrates this. In fact, states are increasingly financing their transportation programs with borrowed funds or by advancing the use of future federal dollars (e.g. Advance Construction, GARVEE, etc.). At the same time, local revenue commitments nationwide are outpacing those of the states. In almost every case, we are doing this with non-user revenues.
- Given this lack of revenue, bridge improvements and the maintenance of existing infrastructure have suffered. This translates into below average obligation rates for the

Bridge Program, especially the 15% share for Off-System bridges, which mostly benefits city- and county-owned bridges. At the same time, states are more and more transferring Bridge funds to other program categories and increasing rescissions of Bridge Program balances.

Our concerns extend beyond the Bridge Program. I cite these examples to illustrate the need to take a fresh look at current practices and move toward making needed reforms. The Conference has been a strong champion of performance measures and other methods that require states and localities to show the public how our resource commitments make a difference.

We mayors understand that there is no free lunch when it comes basic infrastructure. Every day we are required to keep a relentless focus on results, because every day our citizens see at the grassroots whether or not we are providing the basic services they expect, and whether they are getting a good value for their tax dollars.

As policy makers, we need to be honest about our needs to improve mobility, and what it will cost to get there. Minnesota is a case in point.

In Minnesota, like everywhere around the country, people are driving more, and this puts more pressure on our road capacity. Today, we in Minnesota are spending 31% less per vehicle on transportation than we were in 1975. As a result, our roads are dramatically more congested than five years ago. The average driver in the Minneapolis Saint Paul region spends a full work week stuck in traffic every year. We know that both roads and transit are essential to solving this problem, and we have a plan for an integrated system that would increase mobility and create transportation choices for the people who live, work and visit our region. The problem is that we have dramatically underfunded this plan – both in terms of the capital required to build an integrated system as well as well as the dollars required to operate it. To give you an idea of the gap, the difference between what we have and what we need is estimated to be about \$19 billion over the next 20 years. Every year we wait, this gap grows.

The Federal government has been a strong partner with state and local governments when it comes to transportation funding. But too often state governments have not stepped up to the plate. I regret that many states, including Minnesota, have relied heavily on borrowing to fund transportation projects, leaving us to fall further and further behind. Too often, counties and cities are forced to fund basic road and bridge improvements through local property tax increases.

This is not a long-term solution.

- This is why as Mayor of Minneapolis I strongly endorse increases to the state gas tax to fund road and bridge improvements, and why I strongly support strategies like a regional sales tax dedicated to transit funding.
- It is also why I personally endorse the proposal by Chairman Jim Oberstar for a temporary increase in the federal gas tax and to repair or replace bridges nationwide.

We know that when we make these investments in transportation infrastructure, we get results. Here are two quick examples:

- In June of 2004, the Hiawatha Light Rail Line in Minnesota opened for service. Stretching 12 miles, it connects downtown Minneapolis with the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and Bloomington, including the Mall of America. Approximately \$700 million in federal, state and local investments in the Hiawatha Corridor have gotten

results: Over 19,000 people ride Hiawatha LRT every day, reducing congestion, improving air quality, and giving people better choices for how to get around. Ridership has drastically outpaced projections. In addition, public investment in Hiawatha LRT has inspired 5,400 new housing units along the corridor. Overall, we have seen over \$1.5 billion in private investment along the corridor so far since 2002. These are excellent results. The problem is that at our current rate, Minnesota will build one new LRT line every 20 years.

- In November of 2006, Denver RTD opened its newest light rail line in the Southeast Corridor, which connects Colorado's two largest employment centers. The total regional investment is \$879 million, and this investment has delivered results. The 19 mile long line has generated development either under construction or in the works of \$4.25 billion -- not a bad rate of return.

Unlike Minnesota, Colorado has been able to deliver on its regional transportation plan with more than just one LRT line. The primary reason why is FasTracks, a 0.4% regional sales tax increase passed in 2002 that helps fund a 12-year, \$4.7 billion build-out of its rail and bus system. Simply put, Denver and Colorado have stepped up to the plate with reliable regional funding to match the federal contribution, and this makes all the difference in the world.

The lesson is clear. If you invest in quality government you get quality results and if you don't invest there are consequences. As Senator Klobuchar said, "In America bridges should not just fall down." Having lived through the tragedies that I have seen in these past few weeks, those of us who are stewards of the common ground should vow to never again have the kind of consequences we saw in Minneapolis.