# United States House of Representatives
# Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

## The Honorable James Oberstar, Chairman

## Written Testimony
## of
## Michigan Department of Transportation
## Director Kirk Steudle

## September 5, 2007

Mr. Chairman, Representatives, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to testify here today in regard to structurally deficient bridges and Chairman Oberstar's National Highway System Bridge Reconstruction Initiative.

My name is Kirk Steudle, and I am Director and Chief Executive Officer at the Michigan Department of Transportation. First of all, I would like to express my sympathy to the families who have suffered because of the tragic collapse of the I-35W bridge in your home state, Mr. Chairman. When a tragedy like this occurs, it ripples across the transportation industry. Believe me when I say that, as transportation professionals, we all take it very much to heart.

The proposal you are considering prompts an important and overdue discussion of inadequate investment in transportation infrastructure.

More funding for bridges is clearly needed, but I strongly urge you not to stop there. Additional support for structurally deficient bridges needs to be combined with sound long term asset management of the infrastructure. Road and bridge funding programs have not kept pace with the state of the practice of asset management.

MDOT only spent between 87 and 89 percent of its Federal Highway Bridge Program funds in the past two years, not because we weren't investing in bridges, but because the rules for use of Federal Highway Bridge Program funds are too restrictive. The program sets the priorities for state DOTs because of its restrictive rules, and those priorities are not compatible with an asset management process.

In order to achieve the asset management goals we set for ourselves, MDOT has had to look beyond the Federal Highway Bridge Program to fund its priorities. MDOT made the choice to dedicate an additional $75 million annually in state transportation funds, just for bridge preservation. We also used federal funds from other core programs to repair and replace bridges, because federal bridge funds were too restrictive to allow us to make the improvements we felt were needed.

MDOT inspects its bridges more thoroughly and more often than is required by federal law. We set strategic goals for road and bridge preservation. We manage our network of bridges, slowing their deterioration with capital preventive maintenance. And we sometimes make investment choices that are not easily accomplished with limited and highly structured federal funds. But as a result, we've improved our overall bridge condition from 79 percent good or fair bridges in 1998 to 86 percent good or fair today.

I have a few recommendations for you to consider which would make the current Federal Highway Bridge Program more flexible and more useful to states that take a proactive asset management approach to improvement of their transportation infrastructure.

**1. Do not take a "worst first" approach, but an asset management approach.**

For worst first, Michigan can say "been there, done that." While we were focused on fixing the worst problems, other bridges were becoming the new worst problems. Of

course, you want to address anything that poses an imminent threat. Beyond that, an asset management approach keeps bridges from deteriorating, and systematically upgrades those in poor condition. This raises the overall condition of the system over time, and it works. In less than ten years, we were able to take our bridges from 79 percent in good and fair condition to 86 percent.

2. **Revise the Federal Highway Bridge Program to allow full expenditures of bridge funds under an asset management approach.**

- Eliminate the 100 point sufficiency ratings and the arbitrary cutoff points for determination of eligibility for use of Federal Highway Bridge Program funds. The sufficiency rating system has not been modified in over 30 years, and for many agencies, this system actually encourages them to let bridges deteriorate into poor condition so they will qualify for funding. If a state has an asset management program in place, it should be able to use federal funds on the slate of bridge projects it identifies as most efficiently preserving the bridge network.

- If the sufficiency rating system remains, at a minimum, states should be allowed to use federal bridge funds for rehabilitation or replacement of structurally deficient bridge decks when the other major elements, such as superstructure and substructure, are still in good or fair condition. Left unattended, a structurally deficient bridge deck accelerates the deterioration of other bridge elements. From an asset management standpoint, it simply does not make sense to exclude rehabilitation and replacement of bridge decks, even if the rest of the structure is in fair to good condition. It's like saying you should not replace or repair the shingles on your home's roof until moisture has been allowed to penetrate and destroy the drywall or crack the foundation.

- Eliminate the "ten year rule" that prevents state DOTs from using Federal Highway Bridge Program funds on a bridge more than once in ten years. Less expensive preventive maintenance and rehabilitation projects more effectively preserve the condition of a network of bridges. While Michigan has been able to gain exceptions to this rule, this practice was developed upon a "worst first" strategy and penalizes agencies that proactively preserve their bridges. It is an artificial barrier to best asset management practices.

These programmatic changes would allow state DOTs to accomplish more with the resources they are granted.

A short-term bridge program is a good start, and Michigan's traveling public could clearly benefit from additional funding for bridges, but I strongly encourage you to remember that the same types of challenges that exist for the bridge program exist for the entire highway program. They just have not been as visibly and tragically demonstrated.

Inflation has eroded the buying power of the federal motor fuel tax and if the current rate remains unchanged, by 2015, the purchasing power of the current 18.4 cent motor fuel tax will be 30 percent of what it was in 1993. More urgently, the Federal Highway Trust Fund is

expected to have a shortfall of $4.3 billion in 2009. As you consider the need for bridge funding, I encourage you not to lose sight of the entire transportation funding pictu

Thank you, Chairman Oberstar, for bringing this important and necessary debate on funding for transportation infrastructure to the forefront.