



STATEMENT OF

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AND

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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 George Webb and I am the County Engineer in Palm Beach County, Florida. 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. County engineers and elected county officials consider bridge safety to be one of our top priorities and take this responsibility very seriously.

First 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 its relationship to the Chairman's initiative.

Palm Beach County is a large urban county with a population of over 1.1 million. My highway and bridge budget is about \$140 million annually. We have 230 county bridges identified on the National Bridge Inventory System and we are very fortunate that only one is considered structurally deficient and 49 are functionally obsolete. This is due to the fact that because of growth related investments the majority of the bridges in my county were built or rebuilt in the last 30 years and our financial emphasis on system preservation. State-wide in Florida, there are 260 structurally deficient bridges, with 204 owned by local government and 56 by the State.

However, over the next decade or so Palm Beach County's bridges will be wearing out, in part because of high traffic volumes. Some of our bridges carry over 50,000 vehicles per day, which is more traffic than many rural Interstates. Palm Beach County already knows that we face having to replace three draw bridges in the next 10-15 years at a cost of \$50 million each. We don't have the funds for this. In contrast, the State of Florida also needs to replace another three to five draw bridges on the state system in my county and they have access to both state gas tax revenue and the federal bridge program to pay for these projects. Regarding inspection, I have three staff that are certified to inspect bridges. More of my staff need to be certified but we find that the National Highway Institute training programs, at least in Florida, have very limited slots for local government staff.

Let me add that nationally the bridge situation is more critical for local government. Of the 597,340 bridges in the United States, 298,638 are owned

by local government, about 51 per cent of the total. Of the total bridges in the U.S., 154,101 bridges are either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. Of the 73,784 bridges rated “structurally deficient”, about 52,000 or 70 per cent are owned and maintained by local government, mainly counties. The 6,175 on the National Highway System are almost all state-owned. In 38 states of the 50 states, a higher per cent of local government bridges are deficient than state bridges. In 31 states, the total number of local deficient bridges is higher than state-owned bridges.

The National Highway System Bridge Reconstruction Initiative proposes a trust-fund approach modeled after the Highway Trust Fund and financed through a dedicated source of revenue. We generally support this concept for funding this new bridge program. That being said we do feel the reach of the proposed legislation is somewhat limited and should be more inclusive and expanded to include all structurally deficient bridges, not just those on the NHS. Non-NHS bridges that are structurally deficient do pose a threat to public safety and are often very important to a regional economy. In addition we would recommend no requirement for state or local match, which will get the funds out to projects more quickly and will not compete with other infrastructure needs by taking away state (and local) matching funds that have already been committed to other needed projects. Finally, we are concerned what would happen to the existing Federal Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program in the next highway reauthorization if this new bridge program becomes law and whether this could lead to local bridges no longer being eligible for federal bridge funds.

Finally, all levels of government need to continue to strive to accomplish system preservation on our deficient bridges. System preservation is not the replacement project or the major rehabilitation which seems to grab the headlines, but the continuous program of inspection, maintenance and minor repairs needed to both maintain and extend the life of the structure. We in local government remain committed to system preservation but need your help in getting to a point where system preservation can effectively be accomplished. Therefore we strongly urge the Congress to proceed on this new and hopefully expanded initiative to restore our bridge infrastructure nationwide.

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