

**HENNEPIN COUNTY COMMISSIONER MIKE OPAT**  
**BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**  
**TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE**

**SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT**  
**REP. PETER DEFAZIO, CHAIRMAN**

**JULY 9, 2008**

Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I'm Commissioner Mike Opat from Hennepin County, Minnesota, the state's largest county with more than 1.1 million residents, 45 cities and beautiful Minneapolis as our county seat.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify on federal limits to truck size and weight because the policy set by Congress will have a direct impact on Hennepin County, our 1,637 lane-miles of roads and 141 bridges that we own and maintain.

Let me simply state that Hennepin County is opposed to any increases in the size or weight of commercial trucks operating on our highways. This past April, the Hennepin County Board unanimously passed a resolution opposing any increase in truck size or weight, and the Minneapolis City Council unanimously approved a similar measure just three weeks ago.

As you all know, the safety of roads and bridges is of particular concern to my constituents and me. Last August, 13 people were killed when the I-35W bridge collapsed in Minneapolis. A rush of bridge inspections led us to permanently close the Lowry Avenue Bridge, a 103-year-old Hennepin County bridge on the National Highway System which we must immediately replace—and we are seeking federal assistance to help do so. Lowry's four lanes over the Mississippi River, added to the eight lanes lost by I-35W, has put a huge strain on the transportation system of the entire Twin Cities metro area. Apart from Lowry, 10 of our bridges have a Sufficiency Rating below 50; we inspect 45 of our bridges annually for structural safety.

I am aware that there are groups lobbying Congress to raise the weight limit on single trailers to 97,000 pounds and allow double- and triple-trailer trucks in excess of 50 tons. I certainly do not fault commercial trucks for causing a bridge catastrophe in Minneapolis. However, increasing allowable truck size and weights on federal highways, without question, will make Hennepin County's roads and bridges more dangerous.

A 2004 statewide poll in Minnesota found that 77 percent of likely voters opposed increasing truck weight limits on Minnesota roads, and 76 percent opposed allowing larger trucks. (Dixon Polling & Research, Inc., Washington, D.C., poll, from September 11 through September 14, 2004.)

An increase on weight or size limits would also add to the cost of maintaining and upgrading our roads and bridges. Hennepin County highways are often indistinguishable from state and federal roads in terms of size and importance on our transportation grid. And because Hennepin County

is so large, we routinely exchange roadways and bridges with the state. The limits that Congress will set for trucks on federal highways impact Hennepin County roads in a major way, because, as shown on the attached map, the vast majority of exits off of federal highways (in red) are onto County roads (in blue) or municipal roads.

Longer and heavier trucks would overstress some bridges, especially older ones. Bridges are designed with a safety margin for error to ensure against bridge failure. I am concerned that heavier trucks erode that margin for error, increasing the number of bridges that must be replaced or strengthened.

While interstate and other state-maintained highways are designed and constructed for heavy weights, not all municipal roadways are built to this standard. Although many municipalities are burdened with the cost of maintaining non-interstate highways, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) issues permits for overweight vehicles to travel on municipally maintained roads without any compensation to the local community for the roadway damage caused by extra-heavy trucks.

Just three years ago, the Mn/DOT testified at a Minnesota Senate hearing that heavier trucks speed the deterioration of our roads and bridges. Mn/DOT determined that a 20 percent increase in truck weight almost *doubles* the fatigue damage to bridge decks, beams and trusses. (Overview of Bridge Design Loadings, Load Postings and Impact of Heavier Truck Weights presentation by Mn/DOT to the Minnesota Senate Transportation Committee, January 2005.)

According to a comprehensive four-year study conducted by the U.S. Department of Transportation and completed in 2000, bridge costs would skyrocket if truck weights and lengths were allowed to increase. Nationwide operation of bigger trucks would require \$50 billion in capital costs to rebuild or strengthen bridges. (2000 U.S. DOT Comprehensive Truck Size and Weight Study.)

Let me give you more detail on costs to the County, since I know many of you at one time were elected to public office for a City or County. Hennepin County owns and maintains \$3.5 billion in highway and bridge assets. Our five-year capital program will invest nearly a quarter-billion dollars in highway and bridge construction projects. We will spend more than \$119 million this year alone to inspect, maintain and operate our transportation network. Increasingly, as the attached graph shows, we must rely on property tax revenues to effectively subsidize a highway system that our constituents already pay for through gas and vehicle sales taxes and registration fees.

Federal weight restrictions have never been higher than today's limit of 80,000 pounds. An increase in truck weights and sizes on federal highways will directly trickle down to county roads, which were built at a time when there were fewer trucks and lighter trucks. Raising the cap on truck size and weight would also be counterproductive: While every bridge in Hennepin County is safe, when we discover structural problems on a bridge, the first step we take is typically to place a weight limit on its traffic.

This is no time to accelerate the deterioration of county and municipal roads and bridges. Over the past several years, Hennepin County has absorbed tens of millions in cuts from federal and

state aid. Almost all of our services and infrastructure obligations are required by law. We have done more with less, repeatedly, but increasing demands on our highway system will require additional tax revenue. It would hardly be fair for my constituents to pay, with their personal safety and their tax dollars, for the incremental savings that may accrue to the trucking industry from bigger and heavier commercial trucks.

We know that the heaviest trucks contribute a disproportionate amount to highway and bridge wear and tear, and pay less than they owe for maintenance and repairs. In my view, the last thing Congress should do is permit even heavier trucks on our roadways, at a time when existing big rigs already underpay their costs and add to the burdens of average taxpayers.

Mr. Chairman and members, I realize that Congress—and especially this Committee—are placed in a difficult situation on this issue. With rising fuel prices, I appreciate the trucking industry's desire to cut costs wherever possible. But from my view, and I think Mr. Chairman, from the view of every member of the Committee, the safety of the public has to come first. And so I ask you again to maintain existing weight and size limits for commercial trucks.

Mr. Chairman, I thank the Committee once again for the opportunity to testify on this important issue on behalf of Hennepin County.