

(September 5, 2007) Opening Statement on Bridge Safety

OPENING STATEMENT OF

CONGRESSMAN DAN LIPINSKI

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION & INFRASTRUCTURE

Hearing on Structurally Deficient Bridges in the United States

September 5, 2007

Chairman Oberstar and Ranking Member Mica, thank you for your continued leadership and for holding today's hearing. This in-depth and comprehensive hearing is a key step in learning more about the issue of structurally deficient bridges in our country.

With the tragic bridge collapse in Minnesota, it is now more important than ever to critically examine this problem. This horrible tragedy has served as a reminder of why we must continue to fight for robust investments in our transportation infrastructure.

But this hearing is not to just examine this issue. It's so we learn what we can, and so we can do something about it. We must act and do what we can to help prevent future tragedies from occurring. And I believe under this Committee's leadership, we will do just that.

As we all now know, according to U.S. DOT data, there are about 73,000 bridges across the country classified as structurally deficient. There are nearly 2,500 structurally deficient bridges in Illinois alone. Engineers stress that this does

not mean those bridges are necessarily in danger of collapse or are unsafe. However, it does mean that some sort of significant maintenance attention, rehabilitation or replacement is required. State and local governments are doing what they can to maintain and repair bridges, but with limited financial resources, the federal government needs to step up to the plate and do more. There is no doubt in my mind that this ought to be one of the top priorities of the federal government.

At the same time, we ought not lose sight of the broader issue of funding needs in this country. I'm certain that many - if not all - of my colleagues on this Committee would agree. We have significant infrastructure needs with other transportation modes, such as transit and railroads. And while we must find a way to address the significant bridge funding needs in the short-term, with SAFETEA-LU reauthorization only a couple of years away, we need to find new and innovative ways to increase funding levels to the Highway Trust Fund.

In addition to the need for investment, I hope this hearing and the witnesses will help provide some insight on existing bridge inspection standards, so we can determine whether any improvements need to be made. It would be helpful to hear more specifics on items such as how often bridges are inspected and what specific components of the bridge are inspected with the goal of determining whether improvements can be made to current standards. Accurate and up-to-date inspections help spot issues, so they can be fixed before they become problems.

I look forward to listening to the testimony of our distinguished witnesses here today, and I look forward to working together in a bipartisan fashion, so we can quickly craft and act on legislation to address our nation's aging bridge infrastructure.