

Texas Transportation Commission

125 E 11TH STREET • AUSTIN, TEXAS 78701-2483

August 16, 2007

The Honorable David Dewhurst
Lieutenant Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12068
Austin, Texas 78711-0001

Dear Lt. Governor Dewhurst:

The collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minnesota this month was a sobering reminder of the indispensable role that safe, reliable infrastructure plays in our everyday lives.

Texas is home to thousands of miles of roads and more bridges than any other state. We use them to get to work and send buses full of children to school. Our emergency services use them to keep us safe. However, until news of the rush hour catastrophe in Minnesota reached us, few Texans gave a second thought to the state's 50,000 bridges.

Every vehicular bridge in our state, whether it is on a state highway or not, is regularly inspected by the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT). In addition to frequent visual reviews, TxDOT oversees regular, thorough inspections of each bridge by licensed professionals. These in-depth inspections occur every 24 months and the results help determine which bridges need reconstruction or rehabilitation.

In addition to TxDOT's regular and aggressive bridge inspection program, our agency is responding to the Federal Highway Administration's advisories requesting each state to review the safety of structures that resemble the fallen bridge in Minnesota and reminding maintenance teams to closely monitor the weight of their equipment and materials when they are working on a bridge.

Our bridge inspection program is a reflection of TxDOT's commitment to the safety of the driving public. Safety is our most important goal. However, soaring inflation for construction materials is reducing the buying power of highway maintenance funds. Since 2002, road construction costs have increased by 73 percent, an inflation rate far higher than the Consumer Price Index.

In order to keep our roads and bridges safe in the future, Texas will have to spend more money maintaining the transportation assets we have. In June, TxDOT's engineering staff reported to the Texas Transportation Commission that more than \$6 billion would

THE TEXAS PLAN

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need to be transferred from its construction budget to maintenance over the next five years to preserve the current quality of the state's road network, including bridges. The bottom line is that Texas roads and bridges are safe, but keeping our transportation system in good repair is increasingly expensive.

Behind this problem are some basic realities: During the past 25 years in Texas, our state's population increased 57 percent and road use grew 95 percent, but our state road capacity grew only 8 percent.

During the next 25 years, our state's population will increase 64 percent and our road use will grow 214 percent. Absent new resources, state road capacity will increase 6 percent.

Texas faces increased congestion, deteriorating roads, safety issues, and air pollution, all of which hinder our mobility as well as current and future economic opportunities.

As a Gulf Coast state entering the heart of another hurricane season, bolstering our transportation system is about more than cutting gridlock and creating jobs. It is about saving lives. Our road network literally moved entire cities of people out of harm's way in response to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, and our TxDOT professionals stand ready to support evacuations in the future.

However, in each of the recent legislative sessions, TxDOT and its regional partners have been asked to do more with less. The estimated revenue from the state gas tax does not even cover our state's maintenance budget for the next biennium.

To make matters worse, legislation passed this session almost entirely terminated the state's access to private capital for transportation improvements, except for a handful of projects. At a time when other states are working to attract private-sector resources to meet their infrastructure needs, recent legislative action in Texas has severely damaged the prospects of Texas recognizing the potential of public-private partnerships to help meet our state's growing mobility needs.

At the same time, the state appropriations bill will transfer approximately \$1.5 billion out of the state highway fund to non-transportation purposes. The transfer is 15 percent greater than the current biennium. And the Legislature's approval of an additional \$3 billion in Proposition 14 bonds will require TxDOT to mortgage future gas tax revenues in order to pay for projects now. The funds are not "new money" for our state's transportation needs and essentially constitute a payday loan.

During the state's serious debate about how we should pay for the maintenance and enhancement of our highway system, one of the few points of agreement was that Texas needs to spend far more money on its highway system in the future or risk losing the high-quality roads and bridges we have long enjoyed. In the midst of trying to assess the magnitude of the problem, state leadership could not even reach consensus on the tens of billions of dollars we need to spend. Far worse, no long-term solutions were enacted to meet even the most modest goals.

Despite our a growing population, increasing traffic and deteriorating road maintenance conditions, the net result of legislative action was to scale back resources.

As our state's population increases and our economy continues to grow, the demands on our roads and bridges will escalate. In addition to protecting road and bridge safety, TxDOT is also working to reduce congestion, expand economic opportunity, improve air quality and increase the value of transportation assets.

Attached to this letter, please find a list of the state's bridges that are classified as structurally deficient and whether they are scheduled for replacement or rehabilitation. The information will also be made available on TxDOT's Internet site (www.txdot.gov).

At the request of your staff, I have also included a list of all Texas truss bridges that have gusset plates. Gussets plates are steel connectors used to join multiple structural members of a bridge's truss and are used in the construction of many bridge designs.

After carefully reviewing state and federal regulations governing the release of infrastructure data, TxDOT has compiled the attached list of the state's bridges classified as structurally deficient. TxDOT's decision was reached after examining rules that strictly limit the release of bridge information collected for federal reports and additional homeland security constraints on the publication of data regarding the state's critical infrastructure.

The term "structurally deficient" is a technical term that has recently been inflamed in news accounts and public discussions to describe a bridge that is unsafe or presents an imminent danger to the driving public. This characterization is false and grossly misleading. "Structurally deficient" is a term used by the Federal Highway Administration to classify and prioritize bridges for federal funding. Bridges classified as structurally deficient receive priority for rehabilitation and replacement funds from the federal government. Bridges that are in fact unsafe or present an imminent public danger are closed to traffic.

TxDOT's records indicate that 2,024 bridges, roughly 4 percent of all the bridges in Texas, are classified as "structurally deficient." In contrast, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics reports that in 2006, 12 percent of the nation's bridges were classified as structurally deficient.

It is valuable to note that TxDOT's aggressive program to inspect all 50,000 of the state's bridges each biennium, and to rehabilitate and replace bridges that require improvement, is producing results. In 2002, Texas was home to 2,928 bridges classified as structurally deficient. The current figure of 2,024 is a 31 percent reduction in bridges classified as structurally deficient.

In fiscal year 2006, TxDOT replaced or rehabilitated almost 550 bridges across the state at a cost of \$540 million. Texas is well on its way to significantly increasing the percentage of the state's bridges that rate in "good or better condition."

Of the state's bridges classified as "structurally deficient", 445 are on the state highway system and 1,579 are off-system structures, i.e. county or city roads. 282 bridges classified as structurally deficient are currently being rehabilitated or replaced. Those projects are scheduled to be completed in the next two to three years. Another 1,303 bridges classified as structurally deficient are under development as part of the state's ten-year Unified Transportation Plan. The state's remaining 439 bridges classified as structurally deficient are not currently scheduled for rehabilitation or replacement, and no funding has been identified for them.

Adding those 439 bridges to the state's Unified Transportation Plan would cost the state more than \$500 million over 10 years.

However, without new revenue, TxDOT will be forced to protect the safety of the state's roads and bridges by delaying or cancelling new construction projects across Texas. Rehabilitating and replacing the 1,742 bridges not currently under contract could be accomplished in the next 10 years at an overall cost of up to \$2 billion, but it would require halting \$500 million in previously-planned construction projects. Of course, delaying those new projects will add to their cost as inflation erodes the state's transportation budget, and does nothing to address traffic congestion and its negative impact on air quality and economic growth.

Our state faces some tough choices. Do we allow our construction of new roads to slow to a crawl in order to preserve the safety and functionality of our existing infrastructure? Or do we want to expand our road network to keep up with a booming population without sacrificing safety? And how will we pay for it?

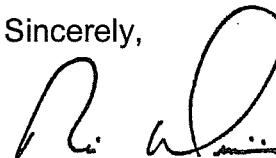
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A little more than 900 miles north of where Interstate 35 leaves Texas, our nation received a heart-breaking wakeup call. We have an opportunity to learn from this tragedy and take action to maintain our world-class road and bridge system, but we cannot take our eyes off the creeping degradation of our air, our economy and our way of life that comes with traffic congestion.

Meeting these challenges requires broad, sustained investment. I look forward to your leadership and the leadership of the Texas Legislature in addressing these important challenges that will have a profound impact on the future of our state.

If you would like to discuss this important matter further, please do not hesitate to contact me at (512) 305-9509.

Sincerely,



Ric Williamson

Chair

Texas Transportation Commission

cc: The Honorable Rick Perry, Governor
The Honorable Tom Craddick, Speaker, Texas House of Representatives
The Honorable John Carona, Chair, Senate Committee on Transportation and Homeland Security
The Honorable Mike Krusee, Chair, House Committee on Transportation
Texas Transportation Commission
Michael W. Behrens, P.E., Executive Director, TxDOT