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County engineers tell Congress of local bridge funding woes

Half of the nation's bridges are owned and maintained by local governments

WASHINGTON, D.C. – About 70 percent of the nation's "structurally deficient" bridges are own and maintained by local governments, but counties need more federal resources to adequately address the problem, according to Congressional testimony delivered today on behalf of the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the National Association of County Engineers (NACE).

George T. Webb, P.E., county engineer, Palm Beach County, Fla., and Susan G. Miller, P.E., county engineer, Freeborn County, Minn., testified today before the House Transportation Committee, chaired by Rep. James Oberstar (D-Minn.) during a hearing on the problem of structurally deficient bridges.

"Nationally, the bridge situation is more critical for local government," Webb testified. "Of the 597,340 bridges in the United States, 298,638 are owned by local government, which is about 51 percent of the total. Of the 73,784 bridges rated 'structurally deficient,' about 52,000 or 70 percent are owned and maintained by local government, mainly counties."

Webb urged the committee to strengthen the reach of the National Highway System Bridge Reconstruction Initiative to be expanded to include all structurally deficient bridges, not just those on the National Highway System (NHS).

"Non-NHS bridges that are structurally deficient do pose a threat to public safety and are often very important to a regional economy," Webb said.

Miller testified that federal bridge funds are critical for counties because "unlike the federal and state governments that rely on user fees for highway funding, local governments rely primarily on property taxes or own source revenue to finance their bridge improvements." She urged Congress not to leave rural local government out of increased federal funding for bridges "or our rural economy will suffer because we will not be able to raise property taxes high enough to meet the needs of all users."

The full testimony is attached. More information is available at www.naco.org.

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The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo provides essential services to the nation's 3,066 counties. NACo advances issues with a unified voice before the federal government, improves the public's understanding of county

government, assists counties in finding and sharing innovative solutions through education and research, and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. For more information about NACo, visit www.naco.org

STATEMENT OF

GEORGE T. WEBB, P. E.
COUNTY ENGINEER
PALM BEACH COUNTY, FLORIDA

AND

PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY ENGINEERS

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.



STATEMENT OF
SUSAN G. MILLER, P. E.
COUNTY ENGINEER
FREEBORN COUNTY, MINNESOTA
AND
PRESIDENT-ELECT OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTY ENGINEERS
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 Sue Miller and I am the County Engineer Freeborn County, Minnesota. 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-elect. 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 the bridge inspection program and possible ways to improve them. Finally, County Engineers consider bridge safety to be one of our top priorities and we take this responsibility very seriously. As a former bridge inspector I supervise and certify the bridge inspections done by my staff.

Freeborn County is a small rural county in south central Minnesota bordering Iowa with a population of about 32,000. We have 176 bridges identified on the National Bridge Inventory System, of which 13 are considered structurally deficient and none are functionally obsolete. We estimate that it will take \$3.53 million to replace these 13 bridges. By comparison, my neighboring County of Fillmore, population 22,000, has 165 structurally deficient bridges of a total of 465 structures. This represents well over \$50,000,000 of needed transportation investment in today's dollars.

Freeborn County receives no federal bridge funds but gets bridge money from the State of Minnesota's bridge fund. NACo and NACE would like to determine how much of the federal bridge program funds get spent on bridges owned by local governments or even on non-federal aid bridges. We ask the Committee to request from FHWA data on what percentage of the federal bridge program goes to non-federal aid bridges in each state, it should be a minimum of 15 per cent, as well as what other federal bridge funds and Surface Transportation Program dollars by state go to county and city governments for bridge rehabilitation and replacement.

Let me indicate how important federal bridge funds are to many local governments. Unlike the federal and state governments that rely on user fees for highway funding, local governments rely primarily on property taxes or "own source revenue" to finance their bridge improvements. Raising property taxes is often unpopular politically and from the perspective of many of our citizens see little connection between better bridges and increasing taxes. Do not leave rural local government out of increased federal funding for bridges or our rural economy will suffer because we will not be able to raise property taxes high enough to meet the needs of all the users.

I want to stress that every day even in our nation's rural areas we face situations which could result in a catastrophic collapse of one of our bridges. It was a miracle that no one was killed on the school bus involved in the I-35 collapse. In Freeborn County, or any other rural county where the majority of children are transported by buses, imagine what could happen if one of our school buses crossing local bridges daily to school was involved in a bridge collapse. I have four children riding those buses and I think about that as a mom too, not just as the county engineer.

I also think about the economic importance of bridges in rural areas. In my county, for example, renewable fuel production has emphasized how vital our transportation system is to support one of the countries leading biodiesel producers, with an annual output of 30 million gallons per year, and additionally two ethanol plants producing 105 million gallons per year. A collapsed, closed or weight posted bridge can have a tremendous negative economic impact on the agricultural, mining or logging industry in our communities. A closed or posted bridge can mean no or limited access to or from agricultural processing plant and that can have a profound impact on the economy of a rural county.

We also have some observations on the Bridge Inspection Program and the Adequacy of Training for Local Bridge Inspectors. The current regulations (23 CFR part 650) note that State DOT's are responsible for inspections for all non federal bridges regardless of ownership. However, it should be noted that some states delegate this authority to counties. The opportunity, availability and affordability of training are concerns of local agencies. In some states no HBRRP or federal funds are made available to local government for inspections. The qualifications for personnel implementing the inspection program require that the state or delegated agency must be accomplished by a licensed professional engineer and have completed the FHWA comprehensive bridge inspection training program. Many counties in some states do not have a licensed professional engineer.

I believe the education and training package maybe appropriate, but it is very costly for local government agencies, especially smaller local ones with limited staff time. Consideration of a tiered approach should be explored based on the types of bridge structure inspected, i.e. many local agencies bridges are relatively simple structures and would not require the expertise for lift, suspension, and other complex type structures. Additionally, as noted by the previsions witness, the National Highway Institute training is offered primarily to state agencies, is very costly for local agencies to afford, and since time slots are very limited, is often unavailable to locals. We would continue to encourage repackaging their training programs for local use and would recommend that this training be turned over to the Local Technical Assistance Program (LTAP) to develop and deploy.

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

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