

**STATEMENT OF
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UNDER SECRETARY FOR POLICY
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
BEFORE THE
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION, HOUSING AND URBAN
DEVELOPMENT, AND RELATED AGENCIES
U.S. SENATE**

*Crumbling Infrastructure: Examining the Challenges of our Outdated
and Overburdened Highways and Bridges*

JUNE 13, 2013

Chairman Murray, Ranking Member Collins, and Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss our Nation's transportation infrastructure challenges. With me is Victor Mendez, our Federal Highway Administrator.

The I-5 Skagit River Bridge collapse has prompted a necessary conversation about the current state of our Nation's transportation infrastructure and how such incidents can be prevented in the future. Thankfully, the May 23 collapse did not cause any serious injuries or loss of life, but it has had, and will continue to have, a major effect on the region's mobility and economic productivity.

RESTORING INFRASTRUCTURE

As Chairman Murray noted, the I-5 Bridge is a vital transportation link for international commerce, carrying an estimated 71,000 vehicles each day, including commuters, between Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia. As much as \$14 billion in freight travels to and from Canada along this busy north-south corridor each year as well.

While it is too early to calculate the full economic impact of the downed bridge, storm-related closures of I-5 in 2007 resulted in more than \$47 million of lost economic output. Businesses in Mount Vernon and Burlington, communities adjacent to the bridge, are already reporting sales decreases of 50 to 80 percent since the bridge collapsed.

According to the Burlington Chamber of Commerce, a local coffee shop typically teeming with customers now experiences hours without any business. One local, small bank has not opened a single account since the bridge collapsed. On the freight side, a large trucking company is rescheduling pickup and delivery times to accommodate congestion-related delays at an estimated loss of \$21,000 per week.

The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is taking the lead in the investigation, working with staff from our Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) headquarters and Washington Division Office. Within hours of the bridge collapse, FHWA engineers from our

Washington Division were on-site to provide technical expertise to NTSB investigators. Additionally, FHWA Deputy Administrator Greg Nadeau visited the bridge site on May 28 and helped expedite a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit to quickly complete debris removal just days after the bridge collapse.

I am proud that the Department acted quickly to minimize economic consequences by making both financial and staffing resources available to Washington State. We immediately provided \$1 million in Emergency Relief program funds to help install a temporary bridge over the river and make permanent repairs.

For the short term, Washington State DOT will put in place an innovative, prefabricated temporary bridge, expected to open next week. The bridge will be constrained in its use and capacity, with a reduced speed limit, and oversized vehicles will have to use a detour route.

The construction of the permanent replacement span of the bridge will also use innovative methods. The permanent replacement span is expected to be fabricated on-site. When construction is complete, the temporary bridge will be removed and the new span will be moved into its permanent location. With FHWA's assistance, Washington State DOT expects to have the permanent repairs complete and the restored bridge open to traffic by October 2013.

And I note that Washington State DOT is the first beneficiary of MAP-21's categorical exclusion expediting the delivery of critical transportation projects in emergencies. The Department will continue to stand by Washington State and provide any assistance needed until all repair efforts are completed and this key link in the nation's highway network is fully operational again.

IMPROVING OUR NATION'S BRIDGES

Despite increased use, the condition of our Nation's highways and bridges has improved overall in recent years, as a result of new technology and techniques used in the design and construction of projects, as well as condition monitoring.

With over 600,000 bridges, the percentage of bridges classified as deficient – meaning that they were either structurally deficient or functionally obsolete – dropped from slightly more than 30 percent in 2001 to 26.5 percent in 2009.

As bridge conditions improve, it is still critical to monitor the condition of the Nation's bridges and frequently assess the load-carrying capacity of those bridges that are showing signs of deterioration. The Department's National Bridge Inspection program relies on federal and state bridge inspectors every day to monitor bridge conditions and ensure critical safety issues are identified and remedied to protect the traveling public. Safety inspections are conducted at least once every two years on highway bridges that exceed 20 feet in total length, and many bridges are inspected more frequently.

One of the newer technologies aiding in bridge condition monitoring is the use of acoustic emission (AE) equipment. Some bridges are being fitted with the AE instruments that listen to the sounds that a bridge makes and can detect the sound energy produced when a crack occurs or

if a crack expands. This information is transmitted back so that continuous bridge condition monitoring is possible.

Despite the Department's rigorous oversight of bridges, a huge backlog of structurally deficient bridges remains. As of December 2012, bridges on the National Highway System (NHS) totaled 117,485, or about one-fifth of the 607,380 bridges inventoried nationwide. Of those NHS bridges, 5,237, or 4.5 percent, were considered structurally deficient. That represents a reduction of 1.4 percent from 2002, when 6,712 out of 114,544, or 5.9 percent, of NHS bridges inventoried were structurally deficient.

Over the past few years, the Department received hundreds of requests through the TIGER and TIFIA programs to repair or replace obsolete and deficient bridges, which resulted in 19 TIGER awards totaling more than \$326 million. For example, the Milton-Madison Bridge Replacement between Kentucky and Indiana restored an important link for the surrounding economically distressed communities that was estimated to have less than 10 years of serviceable life left. Similarly, the Muldraugh Bridge Replacement replaced two deteriorating freight rail bridges that reached the end of their useful life. In Washington, a \$34 million TIGER award helped King County repair the South Park Bridge that was closed to traffic due to its rapidly deteriorating condition.

Several other nationally significant bridges approached the TIFIA program for credit assistance to replace and rebuild failing bridges. The New York Thruway Authority is currently negotiating for loan support to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge across the Hudson River. The Port of Long Beach is also looking to TIFIA to help reduce the cost of replacing the vital Gerald Desmond Bridge, which provides a critical freight connection to the Port. These projects will help repair a few of the Nation's significant bridges, but there is far more demand for investment than we have funds available.

INFRASTRUCTURE DEBATE

The I-5 Bridge collapse has spurred debate about the state of American transportation infrastructure. To me, the fundamental question is not so much whether our transportation infrastructure is crumbling and even collapsing, which fortunately only happens in fairly rare circumstances.

Rather, what is the right level of public investment in our Nation's transportation system to ensure continued safety, foster economic growth, and increase mobility choices for our citizens and businesses? And how can we at the Federal, State and local level ensure that we are building, maintaining and operating the system as efficiently and cost-effectively as possible?

At USDOT, we are very focused on the looming funding crisis for our surface transportation programs and on how we can wring more productivity and efficiency out of our existing system and continue to improve its performance.

We are grateful that Congress passed MAP-21 last summer. After ten extensions of the previous law, MAP-21 provided two welcome years of stable funding -- \$105 billion -- for our highway, transit and safety programs and a lot of good programmatic and policy reforms.

We consider MAP-21's focus on performance one of the most exciting and challenging parts of the legislation. We are working with our stakeholders to develop performance measures in key areas such as safety, pavement and bridge condition, system performance, congestion and freight. Setting performance measures will help decision-makers and the public identify cost-effective policies and investments needed to maintain and improve the national transportation system.

MAP-21 also focused on accelerating project delivery and built upon the work that my colleague Administrator Mendez has led at FHWA with his Every Day Counts initiative. Every Day Counts was designed to further increase innovation and improve efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability in the planning, design, engineering, construction and financing of transportation projects.

For example, Every Day Counts has promoted the greater use of technologies—like assembling bridges from prefabricated elements as is being done to rebuild the I-5 Bridge— that allow critical infrastructure to be built faster, for less money, and with much less disruption to the traveling public and businesses and less impact on the environment.

We are working with our sister agencies to reduce the Federal permitting review process timeline for project sponsors, generating tremendous savings of time and money. We are also implementing the President's directive to cut aggregate timelines for major infrastructure projects in half, while also improving outcomes for communities and the environment. We are likewise encouraging cost-effective innovation and creative new approaches to construction, operations and project delivery.

Thanks in large part to the TIGER discretionary grant program that this Subcommittee has created and supported, and now MAP-21, DOT has greatly stepped up its efforts to work with States and localities to produce better economic analysis, including expanded use of asset management, to ensure that every public dollar is well spent.

Repairing our existing infrastructure is a central component of President Obama's "Fix-It-First" program in the Fiscal Year 2014 budget proposal, which would direct \$40 billion toward reducing the backlog of deferred maintenance on highways, bridges, transit systems, and airports nationwide and put U.S. workers on the job, along with \$10 billion for innovative transportation investments.

The President also proposed a Partnership to Rebuild America to attract private capital to upgrade what our businesses need most: efficient roads, rails, mass transit systems, waterways, and ports to move people and goods, and safe and modern energy and telecommunications systems.

MEETING FUTURE DEMAND AND FUNDING SUSTAINABLE INVESTMENT

But as this Committee knows, MAP-21 is only a two-year authorization, instead of the traditional six-year authorization, because that was all the funding available.

By the end of 2014, the Highway Trust Fund will be nearly depleted and Congress will have transferred nearly \$54 billion in General taxpayer Funds into the Highway Trust Fund to keep the program afloat. We will need an additional \$85 billion in General Funds over the next six years just to keep the program at current levels, let alone grow it. This is clearly fiscally and politically unsustainable.

Meanwhile the demands on our nation's transportation infrastructure will only increase. By 2050, the U.S. population is expected to grow by 100 million people, with many of them projected to live in already congested metropolitan areas.

In this time of severe budgetary challenges, ultimately we need to find political consensus on how to sustainably fund surface transportation over the long term. It will not be easy.

The President has proposed using the savings from the military drawdowns in Iraq and Afghanistan as a source of funding for transportation, and supports programs such as TIFIA, TIGER and an infrastructure bank that would help leverage additional public and private funds for transportation.

Others may have different proposals, and many States, including Virginia, Maryland, Wyoming, New Hampshire and Pennsylvania have recently achieved political consensus on new funding for critical transportation infrastructure.

I know this is one of the many important issues that the leaders on this Committee and throughout Congress will be grappling with in the months to come. The Administration looks forward to seeking a shared solution to sustainably fund surface transportation so that we can maintain our economic competitiveness and States and localities can plan for and build long-term projects.

Senator Murray, I commend your leadership on addressing our transportation challenges. I thank you and this Subcommittee for your FY14 budget proposal, which seeks to provide the necessary resources to build and maintain our Nation's transportation system.

The President has called on us to create an America built to last. We have a long way to go to upgrade our nation's highways, bridges, and transit systems, but we owe it to future generations to make it happen.

Thank you, and Administrator Mendez and I are happy to answer any questions you may have.