

Bridge issues aired in congressional testimony

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George Webb, county engineer, Palm Beach County, Fla., and Susan Miller, county engineer, Freeborn County, Minn., provided the county perspective at a recent House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee hearing on structurally deficient bridges. The hearing was held in response to the I-35W bridge collapse in early August in Minneapolis. Webb and Miller are the president and president-elect, respectively, of the National Association of County Engineers.

Committee Chairman Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) heard testimony from a variety of witnesses on the bridge collapse itself, on the overall condition of bridges in the United States and on his proposal to create a new program to fix the many structurally deficient bridges in the U.S. that are on the National Highway System (NHS). The hearing was Sept. 5.

Webb told the committee how critical the situation is for local government. "Of the 597,340 bridges in the United States,



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Susan Miller (r), Freeborn County, Minn. engineer, testifies on the condition of county bridges at a House hearing. Also giving the county perspective at the hearing was George Webb, second right, from Palm Beach County, Fla.

298,638 are owned by local government, about 50 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. In 38 of the 50 states, a higher percent of local government bridges are deficient than state bridges."

Addressing Oberstar's national Highway System Bridge

Reconstruction Initiative, which would create a new trust fund for bridges funded by a dedicated source of revenue, Webb urged that it be expanded to include all structurally deficient bridges,

not just those on the NHS. He added, "Non-NHS bridges that are structurally deficient do pose a threat to public safety and are often very important to a regional economy."

Miller testified that federal bridge funds have historically been 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. Every day, even in our nation's rural areas, we face situations which could result in a catastrophic collapse of one of our bridges."

She told committee members that a collapsed, closed or weight-posted bridge can have a tremendous negative economic impact on the agricultural, mining and logging industry in rural regions.

In the next month, the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will have further hearings on bridge issues and is likely to consider some variation of the Oberstar bridge funding proposal.