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**Committee on Environment and Public Works
“Oversight Hearing to Examine the Condition of our Nation's Bridges”
Testimony of Senator Norm Coleman**

AS PREPARED

Thank you Madam Chairman, Senator Inhofe, and members of the committee for the opportunity to testify this morning. I often feel like I am an honorary member of this critical committee because of the vision I share with so many of you on the importance of national infrastructure. From Senator Carper and Senator Voinovich’s National Infrastructure Improvement Act that Senator Klobuchar and I proudly cosponsored, to the bipartisan work on the Water Resources Development Act that we have all worked so hard to pass, it feels good to sit before a group of Senators who truly understand the significance of a viable infrastructure network. I thank you and your staffs for all of your assistance and support in the wake of our tragic bridge collapse, and I appreciate the opportunity to discuss this topic with you today.

I would also like to thank my friend Secretary Mary Peters for participating in this hearing. The response from the Secretary and her entire Department to the collapse of the I-35W bridge is something that the people of the Twin Cities and all of Minnesota will remember for years to come. I will outline these efforts in greater detail in my testimony but wanted to begin by recognizing the Secretary’s exemplary efforts and thanking her for her tireless service.

I also want to say a brief word about the true meaning of bipartisanship in the Senate which is often embodied in our response to great tragedy. In particular, my friend and colleague from Minnesota, Senator Amy Klobuchar, who I have the pleasure of testifying alongside today, continues to demonstrate the value of working with both sides of the aisle to best serve our state. If my colleague doesn’t mind, I would recite a quote she had in a local paper back home this week where she said, “I thought the Senate was going to be more partisan – like what you see on TV.” Thankfully, because of the efforts of Senator Klobuchar and her staff, real life in the Senate is much more cooperative than most of the punditry would have us believe. I thank her for her continued efforts to do best by the people of Minnesota.

Madam Chairman, most of us in the North Star State won’t ever forget the tragic event that befell our largest city on “eight one” of this year. Just after six pm on that day, the main transportation artery in the heart of Minneapolis, the Interstate 35W bridge, fell into the Mississippi River killing 13 people and wounding more than 100 others. The images that began to appear on national news within minutes of the collapse are still too difficult to describe with words, and the panoramic photograph next to the dais only begins to outline the magnitude of this disaster’s impact on the Twin Cities and our entire region.

As I mentioned on the Senate floor when Senator Klobuchar and I returned from surveying the damage of the bridge collapse firsthand with Secretary Peters on the day after the tragedy, this area of the Mississippi River is one of Minnesota’s most historic. It was here that Father Louis Hennepin named the falls of St. Anthony, pictured behind me upstream from the wreckage. You can also see Cadwallader Washburn’s and Charles Pillsbury’s flour mills that sprang up along these falls defining an era of growth in our state and earning

Minneapolis the title of “The Mill City.” Closer yet, you see the Guthrie theater, showing the new generation of growth on this historic corridor. These structures, these falls, and this river include so much of our state’s history and identity, sitting on the headwaters of North America’s greatest waterway. This is truly the heart of the heartland.

So as I said on August second on the Senate floor, Madam Chairman, when this bridge fell, part of our Minnesota identity fell with it.

Within 60 hours of the bridge’s collapse, we in the United States Senate took decisive action. We committed the necessary federal resources to rebuild this structure and to rebuild it quickly. The actions we took in this body before recess set out a blueprint for the future of the I-35W bridge and the entire Twin Cities region. We provided authorization for emergency funding, \$55 million of which was sent by Secretary Peters to the Minnesota Department of Transportation almost immediately to begin reconstruction of the bridge. We provided immediate assistance in transit funding including \$5 million to assist the Twin Cities in their most immediate transportation needs including detours and temporary busing. And other federal resources from Navy dive teams to regional transportation administrators from the U.S. Department of Transportation – including Federal Highway Administrator Rick Capka - have descended on the Twin Cities to assist in recovery and rebuilding.

Last week we took an additional step, providing \$195 million in emergency funding for the bridge to ensure that the Minnesota Department of Transportation has the resources they need to proceed with clean up and construction. In speaking with representatives of MNDOT, we understand that without this funding, rebuilding this critical artery could halt as early as October, thwarting the otherwise amazing progress we are making in recovery from this horrible tragedy. While we still need to work to see this funding across the President’s desk, to say that Congressional response to this tragedy has been excellent would be an incredible understatement.

The response of our local officials has been equally commendable. I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge the skill, coordination, and courage of those responding on the scene of this horrific event. Madam Chairman, I was the mayor of St. Paul, Minneapolis’ twin city and proud neighbor, when we experienced the tragedy that will define our era – the attacks of 9/11. I remember the challenges we had with communication, with logistics, and with overall preparedness. We couldn’t get the Ramsey County Police Department to talk to the Hennepin County Police Department. Minneapolis, St. Paul and the State of Minnesota learned the lessons of preparation that day and set out to ensure that if any major emergency should happen again, that we would be ready. You always hope that day never comes, but on August first it came for Minneapolis.

Governor Tim Pawlenty, Mayor R.T. Rybak, the Hennepin County Sheriff’s office, local firefighters, first responders, and hundreds of Twin Cities residents responded in a manner which those of us who witnessed will carry with us forever. Madam Chairman, Senator Klobuchar and I saw the living definition of heroism and leadership that day.

We saw and heard stories of bystanders linking arms to pull victims from submerged automobiles. Rescue divers braving the dangerous current of the Mississippi to reach vehicles beneath the shredded of concrete and jagged steel. And the faces of moms and dads reunited with their children after their miraculous escape from a trapped school bus. These images will reverberate across our state for years to come, and we owe all of those who contributed to these stories of survival our eternal gratitude.

But while the emergency response to the I-35W bridge collapse has been successful, the question before this committee today is how we ensure that something like this tragedy never happens again anywhere in our nation. We need to maintain a bridge program that establishes the most fundamental element of our transportation network: safety.

We realize the challenge is great. Terms like “structurally deficient” and “functionally obsolete” have become everyday language for most Americans in the last two months. We have over 150,000 bridges in this country that fit one of those two categories, with a great many of them included in the National Highway System.

It is our responsibility as legislators to thoughtfully and carefully craft a strategy to improve our bridge program. We need to look at all options, but I think it is important that we start by analyzing the shortfalls of our current program.

To this end, in my capacity as Ranking Member of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations, I have joined my Chairman Senator Carl Levin in asking the Government Accountability Office to conduct a full review of our national bridge program. The GAO has not conducted a study of this program since 1991, and they agree that the time is now for this careful and thorough examination.

We have laid out three specific objectives for GAO to inspect in their investigation: First, we have asked that they measure our effectiveness in maintenance, prioritizing, and investing in needed bridge repairs. Second, we have requested their research into states’ use of federal funds and whether they have been prioritized toward necessary bridge projects. Finally, we have tasked GAO with inspection of federal funding for bridges including the effects of earmarks, DOT formula grants, and the frequently cited “equity provision.” I look forward to working with members of the committee to engage GAO as their review moves forward, and I hope their findings can be a valuable asset to this committee as you deal with this issue in the months to come.

We know we have challenges in front of us Madam Chairman, but it certainly isn’t the first time. I’d like to conclude my remarks this morning by reminding my colleagues of another time in our history when we faced what seemed like an insurmountable challenge to our nation’s infrastructure.

In 1859, the year before he became president, Abraham Lincoln traveled the country. One of his stops was Omaha. On August 13, 1859, he was staying in the famous Pacific Hotel in Council Bluffs, Iowa across the River. He came to give a campaign speech, but he had more on his mind. He gathered there with the top railroad people to ask them a question: What was the best route from Omaha to the Pacific Ocean?

As they stood on the front porch of the hotel, Grenville Dodge, the most knowledgeable railroad engineer in the country, pointed Northwest, the path of the Platte River. Lincoln made a decision that day. Nine and a half years later, the golden spike was driven, and for the first time in history a railroad spanned an entire continent.

We, too, can succeed in our attempts to better our infrastructure. We should start by making our bridges safe for generations to come. I thank you once again for having me before the committee today.