

FROM THE DIRECTOR'S DESK

Statesmanship

– That's what it takes to solve crisis-level problems....problems like infrastructure!

August 1, 2007 – that was the day tragedy struck in Hennepin County, Minnesota, as a bridge on the nation's interstate highway system suddenly fell into the Mississippi River, killing 13 people and injuring 145. Shock was the reaction of us all. How could this happen in this day and age in the United States? I suggest that it happened – and could happen again because of misplaced priorities! When will we quit spending billions and billions of dollars on things we cannot change – when we have our own suffering people and collapsing infrastructure?

You will remember that the U.S. Congress immediately vowed to get to the bottom of the issue so proper blame could be assigned. Every state, including Arkansas, immediately announced a re-inspection of their bridges. While acknowledging that many bridges were “structurally deficient” or “fundamentally obsolete” structures, we were told that they are not in danger of falling down today.

It was not until January 2008 that the National Transportation Safety Board issued a report saying that steel plates (gusset plates) connecting steel beams in the Minneapolis bridge were too thin by half and fractured and were “the critical factor” in the collapse of the bridge. Investigators found 16 fractured gusset plates from the bridge's center span. A final report by the agency is expected this fall.

The Minneapolis span was a steel-deck truss bridge that opened to traffic in 1967. It is ironic that as a result of a catastrophic bridge collapse in 1967 which took the lives of 46 people, Congress enacted legislation requiring that the Federal Highway Administration establish National Bridge Inspection Standards – with the principal objective of ensuring public safety. Not only are structural deficiencies to be identified during the course of the inspection process, but if the bridge is not capable of safely supporting legal load vehicles, the owner (federal, state, county or city) is responsible for posting any weight restrictions in a timely manner. The Minneapolis bridge was deemed “structurally deficient” by the federal government as far back as 1990 and the state's maintenance of the structure has been questioned.

Eleven bridges of the same design as the Minneapolis bridge are on Arkansas highways. They all passed inspection right after the Minneapolis bridge collapse – although some are “structurally deficient” or “fundamentally obsolete”.

Arkansas highway officials don't anticipate making any modifications or improvements to the existing truss bridges. They prefer to replace the bridges. Of Arkansas's 12,000 bridges, a little more than 100 are truss bridges. There are many state and county bridges in Arkansas that need major maintenance or replacement.

What about roads? We know that the State of Arkansas has the need for billions of dollars for highways – the counties of Arkansas have the need for untold millions. Counties in the Fayetteville Shale Play are experiencing extra stress on their road systems due to the big trucks and equipment working in the natural gas drilling industry and that means extra stress on the road budgets of those counties. We welcome the economic activity – but the road damage must be paid for.

The sad truth is it is much more popular to build new structures than maintain existing infrastructures. A road that should be resurfaced on an 8-year cycle can probably be extended to 12 years, and a bridge can surely go another decade so we can reduce taxes this year. ***This nation, this state, and our counties have tremendous needs to update and maintain existing infrastructure while also building new infrastructure to accommodate the populace and economic development.*** That takes money! Yet, an environment has evolved fostering the viewpoint that the citizens should not pay and, in fact, they are already paying too much in taxes *even though we are not keeping pace with the needs of our communities.*

In Arkansas any biennium when there is “excess” or “surplus” state revenues there is spirited discussion over whether or not to return the surplus to state taxpayers in the form of tax cuts. Why do we have those discussions when Arkansas’s road and bridge infrastructure has over \$19 billion in documented unfunded needs – not to mention road and bridge needs at the county level – and the millions of dollars in general unfunded state mandates on county government? With those kinds of needs and liabilities, how is it that we consider the state’s revenue excessive. It is NOT excessive. The tax burden in Arkansas is minimal compared to the tax burden in most states. Why do you think so many people are relocating to Arkansas?

Revenue and expenditure decisions made by governments today lay the groundwork for the future prosperity of our nation, states, counties and cities. Investment made today at the state and local level assures a future that remains bright and an economic potential that remains strong. Laying this foundation cannot be done through polls. When history is examined and courageous leaders identified, they often are not doing the most popular thing at the time. However, history has and will recognize the value of their statesmanship.

Today is a different day. With instant news without particular context, daily polling, talk radio, blogs, e-mail and who knows what tomorrow brings, it becomes harder for leaders to consistently make the best call when it comes to building for the future. The “best decisions” are not always easy, nor are they always popular. We know, however, statesmanship does survive and good leaders will continue to come forward with the *best decisions.*

“There is a difference between a politician and a statesman. A politician thinks of the next election and a statesman thinks of the next generation.” – James Freeman Clark