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Bridge Collapse Revives Issue of Road Spending

By [SUSAN SAULNY](#) and [JENNIFER STEINHAUER](#)

MINNEAPOLIS, Aug. 6 — In the past two years, Gov. Tim Pawlenty of [Minnesota](#) twice vetoed legislation to raise the state's gas tax to pay for transportation needs.

Now, with at least five people dead in the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge here, Mr. Pawlenty, [a Republican](#), appears to have had a change of heart.

"He's open to that," Brian McClung, a spokesman for the governor, said Monday of a higher gas tax. "He believes we need to do everything we can to address this situation and the extraordinary costs."

Even as the cause of the bridge disaster here remains under investigation, the collapse is changing a lot of minds about spending priorities. It has focused national attention on the crumbling condition of America's roadways and bridges — and on the financial and political neglect they have received in Washington and many state capitals.

Despite historic highs in transportation spending, the political muscle of lawmakers, rather than dire need, has typically driven where much of the money goes. That has often meant construction of new, politically popular roads and transit projects rather than the mundane work of maintaining the worn-out ones.

Further, transportation and engineering experts said, lawmakers have financed a boom in rail construction that, while politically popular, has resulted in expensive transit systems that are not used by a vast majority of American commuters.

Representative James L. Oberstar, Democrat of Minnesota and the chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, sent out a news release last month boasting about Minnesota's share of a recent transportation and housing appropriations bill.

Of the \$12 billion secured for the state, \$10 billion is slated for a new 40-mile commuter rail line to Minneapolis, called the Northstar. The remaining \$2 billion is divided among a new bike and walking path and a few other projects, including highway work and interchange reconstruction.

The \$286 billion federal transportation legislation passed by Congress in 2005 included more than 6,000 earmarks, which amounted to blatant gifts to chosen districts, including the so-called Bridge to Nowhere in rural Alaska (that earmark was later removed after a political uproar).

Senator [Charles E. Schumer](#), Democrat of New York, said in a telephone interview Monday that

earmarks for transportation in federal legislation were “almost always new construction and not maintenance.” Earlier, Mr. Schumer said that he would introduce legislation next month to double a proposed federal transportation bill appropriation, with a focus on upkeep to \$10 billion.

“The bottom line,” Mr. Schumer said, “is that routine but important things like maintenance always get shortchanged because it’s nice for somebody to cut a ribbon for a new structure.”

Last week, Representative John L. Mica of Florida, the ranking Republican on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, met with advisers to the Bush administration to urge a nationwide plan to address transportation needs. Rebuilding the I-35W bridge would be only “a Band-Aid” Mr. Mica said, “to a much more serious problem.”

“We don’t have any kind of strategic plan to deal with infrastructure, and we’re falling behind,” he said.

In statehouses across the country, legislators tried this past session to fill some of the void by passing bond acts or allocating money to improve roads, bridges and other pieces of the transportation system.

In Arkansas, lawmakers set aside \$80 million, 15 percent of which will be used to repair county roads, 15 percent for city byways and the rest for its highways. New Mexico approved a \$200 million plan for local and tribal road projects, and in Texas, \$700 million was allotted for state transportation projects over the next two years.

Voters in California this year authorized nearly \$20 billion in transportation bonds to pay for repairs and make other improvements to its taxed system.

“We still barely scratched the surface,” said Adam Mendelsohn, the communications director for Gov. [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#), a Republican. “The governor is very concerned about the lack of attention that the federal government has given to infrastructure. It is probably no more acute than in California because of the tremendous strains from population growth.”

The federal budget for transportation comes largely from excise taxes, particularly on gasoline, set by Congress at 18.4 cents in 1993 and eroded over time by inflation and fuel efficiency. As such, over the last decade, state legislatures in 14 states have voted to raise the state gas tax 19 times. And several states are looking at toll roads and congestion pricing initiatives to help shore up the roads.

The National Conference of State Legislatures, a group with members from all 50 states, is calling for a 3-cents per gallon increase in the federal gas tax.

C. Michael Walton, a professor of civil engineering at the [University of Texas](#), Austin, helped write a series of reports issued by the American Society of Civil Engineers that have repeatedly found the nation’s highway system with insufficient money. “Continually falling short of the actual needs,” Professor Walton said, results largely from “our backlash to increases in taxes.”

Professor Walton said states had been looking to the federal government for leadership. “I am not sure transportation falls to the top of the priorities as it should barring a catastrophic failure,” he said in

reference to state government spending.

A study released in May by the Urban Land Institute and Ernst & Young found that 83 percent of the nation's transportation infrastructure was not capable of meeting the country's needs over the next 10 years. The American Society of Civil Engineers, in its latest national report card, gave transportation infrastructure a D.

Meanwhile, there are urgent needs. The Interstate highway system turned 50 last year and is showing signs of age and inadequate upkeep. Around St. Louis, for instance, old bridges, rocky roads and tight ramp loops have led to a shutdown of parts of Interstate 64/Highway 40 — one of the most important corridors in the state — until late 2009.

"It's so easy to let this stuff slip," said Robert Dunphy, a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute.

The national highway system, originally called the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, came into being under the Eisenhower administration. (The country's population was 169 million then, and there were about 54 million registered vehicles on the roads.) It was spurred by fears that Americans would have a mobility crisis if the country were attacked in a nuclear war. By the 1970s much of the system was completed.

But since then, the nation's highways have eroded with age and use, especially in areas like the Southwest where population booms have far outweighed the ability of roads to carry the new drivers.

Typically financing for capital transportation projects comes from the federal government matched with funds from states, which are then charged with maintaining the roads and bridges. But the federal government and states operate trust funds, filled with revenues from various excise taxes, which have been unable to maintain existing roadways adequately or finance capital expenditures.

But it may often be less the amount allocated for transportation than how it is doled out that leads to eroding highways, some critics say.

"Highway funding is supposed to be on the basis of need," said Raymond Helmer, a transportation consultant in Houston who has worked on transportation projects for over 50 years. "There is supposed to be cost-benefit analysis, and every state does a study as required by federal government and comes up with needs, but then politicians say, 'I don't want that road here, I want it here.'"

Some transportation experts also said that though light rail and other public transportation projects made sense in cities, investing in them in sprawling suburban regions might not, even if the systems were supported, in theory, by the public.

"Too many American cities are spending far too much money on expensive rail transit projects, which are used for only 1 to 2 percent of local travel, and far too little on highway projects which are used for 95 to 99 percent of local travel," Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute, said in an e-mail

interview.

There has also been more emphasis nationwide on building new roads than on the maintenance and upkeep of old ones. Steve Ellis, the vice president of Taxpayers for Common Sense, a group that monitors federal spending, said that might help move traffic in some places, but it left many others with the equivalent of a leaky roof.

“It would be irresponsible of me to go out to dinner if I couldn’t fix a leak in my roof,” Mr. Ellis said. “But that’s essentially what we do. We don’t take care of what we’ve got, but we talk a lot about building more and new.”

Susan Saulny reported from Minneapolis, and Jennifer Steinhauer from Los Angeles.

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