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Bridge safety still lacks urgency

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WASHINGTON - It was evening rush hour, Aug. 1, 2007, and Jim Oberstar, then the powerful chairman of the House Transportation Committee, was in a heated floor debate over water projects. Suddenly his BlackBerry buzzed.

"I looked at it cursorily and saw an 'M,'" the former congressman recalls. "And then I saw 'bridge,' and 'collapsed.'" Thinking of plausible places a bridge might fall down, his mind fixed on Mauritania.

"Then I looked closer and saw the 'M' was Minneapolis," he said. "Oh, my God."

By night's end, Oberstar's staff was drafting legislation to replace the Interstate 35W bridge, which had gone down without warning, killing 13 people and injuring 145.

But five years later, the effort by Oberstar and others to sell the nation on an ambitious plan to shore up America's aging infrastructure has proven to be a bridge too far.

Strides have been made to cut the backlog of 72,520 bridges that were considered in need of replacement or repair in 2007. But many fear that the scale of the nation's response has not been in proportion to the shock of an eight-lane interstate highway bridge dropping without warning in a major population center.

"Nothing extraordinary came out of the tragedy other than a momentary heightened awareness of the need to invest in bridges and highways," says a disappointed John Horsley, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. "It wasn't the trigger that caused the millennium to arrive."

Billions in federal, state and local dollars continue to pour into the maintenance of the nation's bridges since that span of I-35W fell into the Mississippi River. But at last count in 2010, the nation still had a backlog of 69,223 "structurally deficient" bridges -- 11.5 percent of all highway bridges in the U.S.

More than 1,100 of them are in Minnesota, one of the few states that has raised its gas tax and significantly increased funding for highway and bridge rehabilitation.

'Stifling everything'

Congress, meanwhile, remains mired in a protracted struggle over infrastructure spending, which remains flat as the nation is about to observe the five-year anniversary of the 35W disaster.

A long-delayed national transportation bill signed by President Obama this month largely maintains current spending levels for roads, bridges and highways. National experts say it falls far short of the goal of bringing infrastructure into the 21st century.

Still, many road engineers hailed the bill, which was delayed three years, because previous Republican budget proposals would have cut funding by as much as a third. "Congress, with the big split between the parties, is stifling everything," said Andrew Herrmann, president of the American Society of Civil Engineers. "We're not investing, we're not improving, and we're paying for it."

With much of the nation's interstate highway system dating back to the Eisenhower era, the average bridge in the U.S. is now 43 years old. The 35W bridge, for example, opened in 1967.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, more than 26 percent, or one in four, of the nation's bridges are either structurally deficient or "functionally obsolete," a separate designation that often means a span was not designed for modern traffic conditions.

While the group says some progress has been made in recent years to reduce the number of deficient and obsolete bridges in rural areas, the backlog in urban areas is rising. A \$17 billion annual investment is needed to substantially improve bridge conditions, the organization says. Currently, only \$10.5 billion is spent annually on the construction and maintenance of bridges.

With the nation facing trillion-dollar deficits, money has always been the hang-up, even as lawmakers in Washington frequently declare bridge safety a national priority.

In the weeks after the 35W bridge collapse, Oberstar tried to channel the national alarm into support for a nickel increase in the 18.4-cents-per-gallon federal gas tax, which was last raised in 1993. The problem was that the tragedy was followed by the traditional August congressional recess. When lawmakers returned in September, he said, "the weak knees were weighing in."

Struggle to raise revenue

If anything, support in Congress for raising the gas tax has eroded since 2007, with lawmakers now looking for other ways to make long-term investments in transportation infrastructure. With more fuel-efficient cars on the road and the Highway Trust Fund running out of money, some have called for a new tax based on vehicle miles traveled,

known as VMT. But that has raised privacy concerns, as well as objections from rural lawmakers who say it would increase the costs of driving long distances.

Among the opponents is freshman Republican Rep. Chip Cravaack, who defeated Oberstar in 2010 and has opposed new taxes on driving such as the VMT.

Arguing that the U.S. is paring down the number of structurally deficient bridges, some experts question the prevailing narrative of "crumbling" highway infrastructure and the need to raise more revenues to meet the challenge.

"I think the picture is getting better," said Randal O'Toole, a transportation expert at the Cato Institute, a market-oriented think tank in Washington. In particular, O'Toole notes, the collapse of the 35W bridge was found to stem from a design flaw in its original construction, not a lack of maintenance.

But concern about a dearth of new government revenue has prompted calls for public-private partnerships like a national infrastructure bank proposed by U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who famously said after the 35W disaster that "a bridge shouldn't fall down in the middle of America."

But Klobuchar's proposal to prime the bank with a 0.7 percent surtax on income above \$1 million was rejected the Senate. Still, the idea remains alive, and the Obama administration last week announced that it was making available \$17 billion in loans for critical infrastructure projects across the country as a result of the recently enacted transportation bill.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood called it the largest infrastructure loan program in the nation's history. "Americans have always done big things," he said, "not in spite of hard times, but as a means of overcoming them."

The Minnesota Legislature, hit most directly by the political tremors of the 35W bridge collapse, raised the state gas tax 5 cents over the veto of then-Gov. Tim Pawlenty.

Facing questions about bridge maintenance under his administration, Pawlenty ordered inspections of all the state's similarly designed truss bridges. The review hastened the replacement of at least one bridge in St. Cloud and repairs to several major bridges around the state.

Bridge inspection staffing has been beefed up, and a new automated management system for bridge maintenance has been set up. The state also now requires a formal independent review process for new bridge designs.

"We've worked very hard to make sure the tragedy resulted in some positive bridge safety improvements," said Nancy Daubenberger, state bridge engineer with the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Still, some lament the lost consensus for infrastructure spending, one of the few areas that used to enjoy bipartisan support in Congress.

"We can't afford to see more 35W bridges collapse," said former U.S. Rep. Jim Ramstad, a Minnesota Republican who huddled with Oberstar and offered his support on the night of the accident. "Unfortunately, we didn't learn from the tragedy of five years ago."

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