

SESSION WEEKLY

Interim Update

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Bridge collapse reaction

Members question costs, design of potential replacement

By MIKE COOK

House and Senate transportation committee members sounded a cautionary note Aug. 15 as they viewed the preliminary [reconstruction plan](#) for replacement of the Interstate 35W bridge, which collapsed Aug. 1.

Five construction teams have been invited to submit their own designs for a new 10-lane bridge, with a goal of having the new span open by the end of 2008. Awarding of the project could take place in September.

Some committee members questioned whether the timetable was too aggressive and coming at the expense of exploring other options. The absence of any plans for light rail concerned others.

[Department of Transportation](#) officials said

that \$250 million in federal funds awarded to the state are [for a replacement bridge](#), not an enhanced one.

It was noted that additional features, such as room for light rail, could be included at state expense, which at least one constitutional officer does not support.

In an [Aug. 10 letter](#) to [Gov. Tim Pawlenty](#), Lt. Gov. Carol Molnau, who doubles as transportation commissioner, wrote along with Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell, that the “inherent disadvantages of including LRT do not justify the expense and delays that would result from further study.” They said a study would take at least six weeks, and up to two years of additional review would be required. The department also believes it

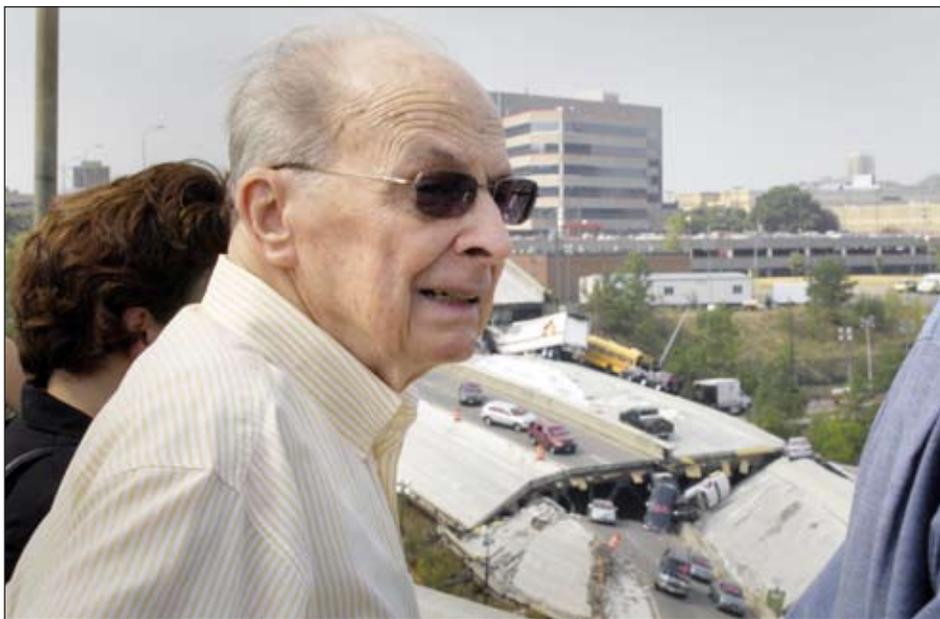


PHOTO BY ANDREW VONBANK

Rep. Bernie Lieder, chairman of the House Transportation Finance Division, and Rep. Shelley Madore were two of the legislators who got a firsthand look at the Interstate 35W bridge wreckage during an Aug. 6 tour. Members also saw the destruction from ground level.

GET STATE FAIR POLL RESULTS

Results from the Minnesota House of Representatives' state fair poll are scheduled to be on the House Web site, www.house.mn, Sept. 4. Results from previous state fair polls are available online at <http://www.house.mn/hinfo/Fair/pollmain.asp>.

would be more cost effective to “reinforce or rebuild the Washington Avenue bridge, or build a stand-alone LRT river-crossing, than to add an LRT component to the I-35W bridge.”

[Rep. Melissa Hortman](#) (DFL-Brooklyn Park) was among members questioning the process. “I’m concerned that the amount of money available is driving what we’re considering. My concern is we’re doing this backwards. ... If it’s an unbearable cost we can scale it back.”

However, Deputy Transportation Commissioner Lisa Freese said money may not be the most important reconstruction driver.

“It’s a schedule issue. We could slow this down for a month or two, and we could probably still complete the bridge fairly quickly. But when we start talking about some of the major betterments that people are contemplating, we kick in a much more extensive environmental process — a process that typically takes us 18 months to three years to complete.” Federal officials have indicated that an increased foundation size would likely result in a longer assessment process.

[Rep. Mary Liz Holberg](#) (R-Lakeville) noted the longer it takes to reconstruct the span, not only will costs increase because of inflation, but the more it hurts commerce. She said the main north-south artery through the region is gone, and semi-trucks are not permitted on a portion of Interstate 35E in St. Paul.

Abby McKenzie, transportation program director of the department’s [Office of Investment Management](#), said the department is working with the [Department of Employment and Economic Development](#) to determine the economic results of the collapse. She believes it’s costing about \$400,000 each day in lost time and increased vehicle operation. Study results are expected in early- to mid-September.

Members are scheduled to meet again Aug. 22.

To watch the meeting, go to www.house.mn/hvt/archivesall.asp?ls_year=85.

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A firsthand look

The meeting came nine days after committee members and legislative leadership got an up-close look at the collapse.

Standing in a secure area about 100 feet from the northern section of the bridge, and about 30 feet up from the river, a number of legislators' eyes were visibly reddened as they looked at the masses of steel and concrete in front, behind and almost above them. Five days after the incident, the site remained eerily quiet.

"It's important and necessary to see the destruction. To see the structure and the failure, it's..." [House Majority Leader Tony Sertich](#) (DFL-Chisholm) said after the tour, before pausing. "It's hard to put into words."

With the bridge collapse leading to questions about the state's infrastructure, some legislators expect a special session to be called this fall to address transportation funding. Now that Pawlenty has expressed his openness to the idea, a gas tax increase could be on the table. Pawlenty vetoed the transportation finance bill, which included a 7.5-cent increase, during this year's regular session.

"Some people will say no to everything, but they'll be in serious trouble if they don't align with the people," [Rep. Ron Erhardt](#) (R-Edina), vice chairman of the House Transportation Finance Division, said after the tour. At the

meeting he asked about a special session date, but there was no response.

A 16-member joint legislative committee has also been created to investigate the collapse. It is to look at MnDOT policies and practices and department decision-making in response to bridge inspection reports.

"Early on, we promised Minnesotans we would find out why this bridge collapsed," [House Speaker Margaret Anderson Kelliher](#) (DFL-Mpls) said in an Aug. 14 press release. "It is vital that we answer that question to help restore the public's confidence in our transportation system."

HIGHLIGHTS

MAY 21 - AUG. 16, 2007

GOVERNMENT

Capitol renovation plans

It could be back to the drawing board for the most recent State Capitol renovation plan that calls for \$260 million to help restore and enhance the building that opened in 1905.

The latest draft plan, although only 55 percent complete at a cost of nearly \$1.2 million, appears to have hit the skids, and a [Capitol Restoration Working Group](#) is charged with deciding where to go from here.

Commissioned in 2005, the plan is seen as problematic not only because of its hefty price tag, but also the process used for its development — a process that has put the Senate and the House at odds.

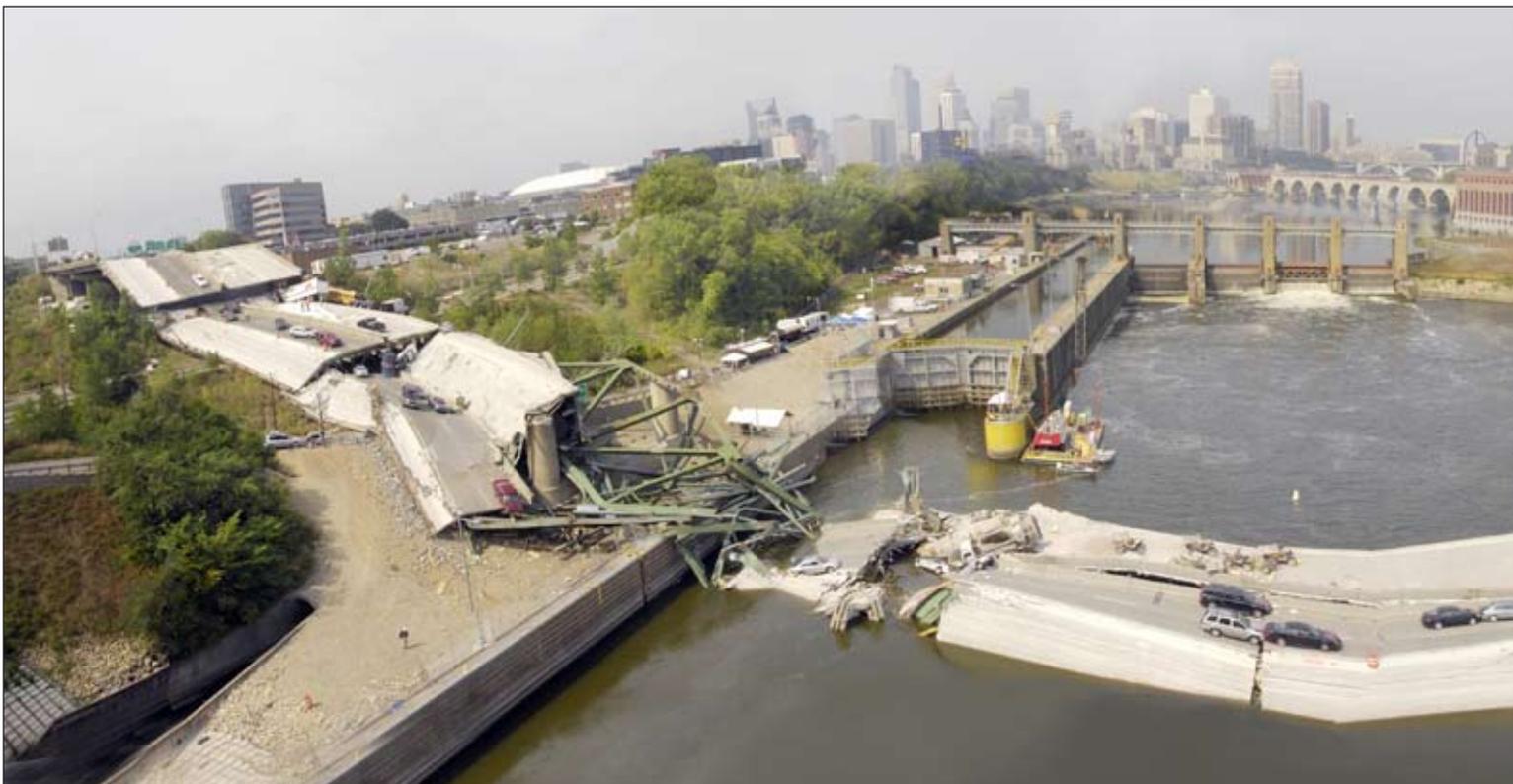
"It's the big price tag," said [Rep. Alice Hausman](#) (DFL-St. Paul), who co-chairs

the group with [Sen. Keith Langseth](#) (DFL-Glyndon). "You have to ask if there are other priorities that are equally as competing before we rush to spend [this amount of money]."

As plans emerged, House members felt that body had been left out of the planning process, and that the Senate would benefit most from the project. "We resisted when it appeared that we were putting a lot of money into offices and hearing rooms for one chamber," Hausman told the working group.

In an effort to resolve the differences, the Legislature appropriated \$250,000 in 2007 for a working group to consider the plan's future and if other strategies should be looked at for the needed upgrades to the building and other Capitol Complex planning issues.

With a leaking roof, security concerns, rising energy costs and infrastructure unable to handle new technology demands, some



To replace the structure that collapsed Aug. 1, Gov. Tim Pawlenty and other state officials hope to have a new Interstate 35W bridge open in Minneapolis by the end

say there is little time to waste. But the question is how much. And, with the need for more parking and office space throughout the complex, should the plans take into consideration the whole Capitol Complex?

During its first meeting Aug 3, the 20-member group, made up of legislators, administration officials and members of the public, was candid on what they see as wrong with the current schematic, and the issues that need to be addressed if there is to be ultimate consensus on a plan.

A Sept. 30 deadline looms for the group's recommendations to the Legislature on how to proceed.

No future meeting date was set.

To view the meeting video, go www.house.mn/hvt/archivesall.asp?ls_year=85

— L. SCHUTZ

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Health care reform

A member of the "Gang of Seven" who led a bipartisan effort to consensus on health care reform in the early 1990s gave support to legislators hoping their efforts will lead to health care reform in 2008.

"This is a long suffering experience you

are starting," former Sen. Duane Benson (R-Lanesboro) told the [Legislative Commission on Health Care Access](#) Aug. 15.

"You may not see it in '08 or '09, but it may happen in '10. The only way you'll fail is if you quit," he said.

Chaired by [Rep. Thomas Huntley](#) (DFL-Duluth) and [Sen. Linda Berglin](#) (DFL-Mpls), the 10-member commission that oversees implementation of the MinnesotaCare law, has been charged with making recommendations to the Legislature by Jan. 15, 2008, on how to achieve the goal of universal health coverage for all Minnesotans.

Since July, seven working groups comprised of legislators, members of the business community and organizations interested in health care reform have been meeting to address cost containment strategies, public health initiatives, insurance market reform, health care for long-term care workers and single payer health care issues.

During the commission's organizational meeting in July, Tom Forsythe, vice president of corporate communication for General Mills Inc., was among the panelists calling for systemic reform. Calling health care the "defining issue of our generation," he said, "We believe that we need universal coverage — we support and endorse it, but not in a system that is broken."



What's going on at the Legislature?

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Health care is more than just a visit to the doctor's office or the emergency room, panelists said, adding that a more holistic, systemic approach is essential if the state is serious about containing rising health care costs.

Subcommittees have scheduled meetings through August, and the full commission is expected to meet again Sept. 5.

To view meeting video, go to www.house.mn/hvt/archivesall.asp?ls_year=85

— L. SCHUTZ



STITCHED PHOTO ILLUSTRATION BY ANDREW VONBANK

of 2008. However, some legislators are concerned the reconstruction plan is too fast and does not address all possible alternatives, including room for light rail.

Low poverty numbers are concerning

Minnesota has one of the lowest poverty rates in the nation, but the numbers are somewhat deceiving.

Such was the message shared Aug. 2 with the [Legislative Commission to End Poverty in Minnesota by 2020](#).

According to a 2005 [American Community Survey](#), 9.2 percent of Minnesotans live below the federal poverty line, the fifth-lowest mark in the country. The national average is 13.3 percent. However, if the state had the ethnic makeup akin to other states, the percent of people in poverty would be 12.4 percent. State Economist Tom Stinson said 2006 survey results are expected by the end of the month.

State Demographer Tom Gillaspay said the 19 percent poverty rate in Minneapolis and St. Paul puts those cities on par with Louisiana and the District of Columbia. The rate is 13 percent in northern Minnesota, 11 percent in the northwest area and 4 percent in the suburban and exurban rings.

According to a June 2007 [report](#) by the JOBS NOW Coalition, a group of 115 religious, labor, business and community organizations, in a family of three with both parents working,

each worker would have needed to earn at least \$10.14 per hour in 2006 to meet the costs of basic family needs; \$12.24 for a family of four. However, 37 percent of Minnesota jobs pay less than \$12.24 per hour; 26 percent pay less than \$10.14 per hour.

While job creation is one avenue the commission is expected to look at, [Rep. Frank Moe](#) (DFL-Bemidji) noted that even low paying jobs in Greater Minnesota can often have hundreds of applicants.

In the seven-county Twin Cities metropolitan area, a family of four where both parents work, would need about \$55,000 annually to meet basic needs, which breaks down to about \$13.19 per hour for each worker, but 35 percent of jobs pay less than that. The average hourly wage for the same family in Greater Minnesota to meet basic needs is \$10.58, a figure that is not met by 36 percent of jobs.

Created by a [2006 law](#), the commission is to study public policy strategies to end poverty in the state by 2020. A final report is due to the Legislature by Dec. 15, 2008. An interim report is scheduled to be available for the 2008 Legislature.

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For information on any meetings scheduled during the interim, go www.house.mn/hinfo/hinfo-sched.asp. To subscribe to the house schedule electronic mailing list go to www.house.mn/list/join.asp?listname=houseschedule.

"Members should open their eyes to new ideas," said former Sen. John Hottinger (DFL-St. Peter), who sponsored the law with [Rep. Jim Abeler](#) (R-Anoka), a commission member.

In addition to the overview meeting, the commission is tentatively [scheduled](#) to have nine listening sessions across the state between Sept. 27 and Jan. 10, 2008.

The meeting can be viewed at www.house.mn/htv/archivesall.asp?ls_year=85.

— M. Cook



PHOTO BY TOM OLMSCHEID

House Minority Leader Marty Seifert, left, applauds as Supreme Court Justice Lorie Skjerven Gildea, second from left, congratulates the House's newest member, Rep. Steve Drazkowski, during ceremonies in the chamber Aug. 16. Rep. Drazkowski, center, was joined by his wife Laura, second from right, and daughter Kinsey, right, for the swearing-in. Drazkowski replaces Rep. Steve Sviggum who was appointed labor and industry commissioner.

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Session Weekly Interim Update is a nonpartisan publication of Minnesota House of Representatives Public Information Services. During the 2007-2008 Legislative Session, Session Weekly reports House action between Thursdays of each week, lists bill introductions and provides other information. No fee.

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