



Just Say No to Stillwater Bridge

November 9, 2011

Dear Energy and Natural Resources Committee Member:

Taxpayers for Common Sense Action urges you to oppose S. 1134 (“St. Croix River Crossing Project Authorization Act”) when it comes before the Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Granting the proposed bridge between Minnesota and Wisconsin over the St. Croix River a Wild and Scenic Rivers Act exemption is one of the final few steps before taxpayers are asked to spend many millions on a bridge that is too big and costs too much.

Passage of this bill would tie the hands of the relevant state agencies, and leave them just two choices: build the unacceptably large and expensive bridge as currently proposed, or build no bridge at all. A new bridge is warranted to replace an outdated lift bridge, but only if it is done at a far lower cost. The good news is that a less expensive alternative exists, and would save approximately \$300 million.

Therefore, the project as proposed should be rejected; and since S. 1134 would only allow for the construction of the current proposal, it should be rejected as well.

As you know, the nation faces immense budget challenges, including a trillion-dollar-plus deficit and more than \$14 trillion in debt. The state of our transportation program is little better, as the highway trust fund collects inadequate funds to meet the nation’s transportation challenges. As a result, doing more with less is essential, and the same holds true for the proposed St. Croix River crossing.

We are deeply concerned about the scale and cost of this project for a number of reasons:

- Driven by a desire to create a “signature” bridge for the region, stakeholders chose the most expensive alternative. This would be by far the most expensive bridge ever constructed in Minnesota, and would be more expensive than the cost of two other Minnesota bridges – the I-35W and Lafayette bridges – *combined*, yet will carry less than 10% as much traffic. When every dollar is scarce, it is simply irresponsible to build signature bridges that place form before function, and asking taxpayers to fund such an expensive project to carry the 18,000 vehicles the current bridge accommodates is outrageous.

- According to Minnesota Department of Transportation documents, the so-called “extradosed” bridge proposed for this project, comes with “relatively high cost risk.” An extradosed bridge – a combination of a box girder bridge and a cable-stayed bridge – is under construction in Connecticut, and that is the only other example of its kind in the U.S. MnDOT lists its own lack of internal expertise regarding such a bridge as a project risk. Though some of the extra risk has been built into the project’s cost estimate, there still remains an increased chance of cost overruns. The bill, as written, would leave no alternative other than to build this style of bridge.
- Building this bridge would limit the funds available for the other priorities in Minnesota and Wisconsin. Combined, the two states have more than 2,000 deficient bridges and nearly 6 million trips are made across them every day. In addition, nearly half the roads in Minnesota and Wisconsin need additional maintenance to get them back to “good” condition. Building such an expensive bridge across the St. Croix, with the chance of significant cost overruns, would seriously hamper each states’ ability to perform these vital maintenance efforts in as timely a manner as possible, to say nothing of new facilities that may be required to relieve congestion, improve safety, facilitate commerce, and keep the transportation system moving efficiently.

There is little question that a new bridge is required at this location to replace the outdated lift bridge that currently carries traffic over the St. Croix, but this can be done at a far lower cost than is currently envisioned. The proposed bridge is a relic from a different time: before our nation finally committed to taking care of its budget mess, before the end of the housing boom that dramatically changed the landscape in western Wisconsin, and before the transportation program was forced to scramble to find sources of revenue to prevent deep funding cuts in future years.

At the very least, it is worth taking a hard look at the proposed alternative. Unfortunately, the bill before you today would eliminate the consideration of any alternatives. We understand that there is an urgency to move forward with a new bridge, but accepting a project that is too big and too expensive for the sake of speeding project delivery would be irresponsible at any time, and even more so while we are doing everything possible to find our way out of a budgetary mess.

If you would like additional information, please contact Erich Zimmermann in my office at (202) 546-8500 x132.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "A. Ryan Alexander". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "A. Ryan" and the last name "Alexander" clearly distinguishable.

Ryan Alexander
Taxpayers for Common Sense