

August 27, 2007 The recent and tragic bridge collapse in Minnesota raises many questions in Americans' minds about our aging infrastructure, and what is being done to maintain it. Questions such as: "Was I-35 an isolated accident or are we approaching days when crumbling bridges and bursting pipes will be regular features on the evening news?" The poor ratings on the inspection report of that bridge, and similar deficiency findings on as many as 25% of our bridges suggests the latter. Estimates on what it will cost to bring deficiencies in our infrastructure back up to par range from massive to astronomical. Billions of tax dollars at all levels of government are devoted to infrastructure, but one problem is that politicians love to cut ribbons. Political capital is gained not from maintaining or repairing our systems, but from building new bridges, new stadiums, and new roads, often of questionable real utility. Seldom is there a ceremony or photo opportunity for repairing or maintaining something already in place. As the so-called Highway Trust Fund is set to go bankrupt as early as 2009, private investment firms are gearing up for partnerships, which could be a positive step, if handled sensibly. What we need to avoid are items such as the Trans Texas Corridor (TTC), which is phase 1 of the NAFTA Super Highway . The Spanish firm Cintra is set to take over toll collections after the TTC's completion, however it is unclear that they'll have any obligations for maintenance. The cost is being socialized, while the profit is privatized, effectively making the American people pay for it twice. Infrastructure, in a capitalist model, is an asset worthy of maintaining to ensure continuity of revenue. In a government controlled model infrastructure is nothing but a cumbersome liability. This should be taken into consideration when developing plans to keep our current infrastructure safe. Privatization should be used to encourage maintenance and safety, and where private companies truly invest and bear the upfront costs in return for ability to collect tolls or usage fees in some form. But public/private partnerships that look more like corporate welfare must be avoided. We should re-examine how we handle the taxes we collect for infrastructure and how we allocate that money. At the very least reins need to be put on the Highway Trust Fund. Funds collected from the gas tax should go into the Trust Fund--period. Even the most ardent liberal and passionate conservative can agree that when they pay gasoline taxes, the least they expect is a road and bridge system that won't crumble beneath their feet. Before any subsidies or welfare payments are paid out, before social security is handed out to illegal immigrants, or health care is given to everyone, before bridges to nowhere are built at home, or entire countries bombed and rebuilt abroad, before any other myriad of exotic government projects are even considered, infrastructure should be attended to and taken seriously.