

Statement of David A. Beaudet, Mayor, City of Oak Park Heights Minnesota

**Subcommittee on National Parks, Forest and Public Lands, House Committee
on Natural Resources**

In opposition to H.R. 850

May 4, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Raul Grijalva and members of the subcommittee, I am David Beaudet, Mayor of the City of Oak Park Heights Minnesota. My city, of just under 5,000 people, is located along the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway exactly where this new bridge is proposed. I appreciate the opportunity to testify in opposition to House Resolution 850.

We need a new bridge crossing the St. Croix River. But the bridge that is referenced in HR 850 is a project that is inflated and out of scale. It is out of scale for the taxpayers who will pay for it; it is out of scale for the property owners who will live with the impact of this giant structure; and it is out of scale for the river itself and the Lower St. Croix Valley.

On October 2, 1968, the historic Wild & Scenic Rivers Act was signed and for the past 43 years over 200 Wild & Scenic Rivers, including the St. Croix are protected by this act which states “It is hereby declared to be the national policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments, possess outstanding remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historical, cultural or similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.”

The upper portion of the St. Croix River was one of the original eight rivers included in the Wild & Scenic Act; and the Lower 27 miles of the St. Croix, where this bridge is proposed, was designated Wild & Scenic in 1972. Over the years, property owners have worked together to protect and improve the St. Croix riverway giving up improvements to homes, building and the grading of land that would harm their River. It was the construction of the controversial A.S. King power plant that lead to “Save the St Croix,” a citizen’s initiative, which tried to protect the St. Croix River from the King Plant. After permits were granted, these citizens worked with other groups to get the entire St. Croix River protected from future damaging developments. After the King Plant was built, everyone agreed and realized that a mistake had been made by not including the Lower St. Croix in

the original designation. Let's not make that same mistake today by adding yet another oversized structure to this beautiful river.

The cost of this project is out of scale and irresponsible, especially in this fiscal environment. The latest cost estimate for the bridge project is \$574 - \$690 million. Minnesota's project share is about \$380 million and Wisconsin's project share is between \$250 - \$310 million. The State of Minnesota has one of the nation's largest roadway systems and the Twin Cities region has one of our nation's largest regional highway systems. We have many, many unmet needs for repair now, and the list is growing. Minnesota Department of Transportation reports that over the next decade it has unmet needs for pavement repair of \$1.7 billion and can only meet 85% of the need for bridge repair. Building a costly new highway-style St. Croix Bridge would take money away from pressing repair needs across the state. And the fiscal issues in the state of Wisconsin have been the subject of national news.

With the construction of the Mega Bridge the entire transportation corridor would collapse requiring millions of additional transportation dollars to be spent on connecting roads. In a May 2001 Minnesota Department of Transportation Study, the trip home from North St. Paul, Minnesota to Oak Park Heights Minnesota, would be 45 MPH, this same trip after a proposed bridge is completed would be at 32MPH for a road posted speed of 60 to 65 MPH. The cost to upgrade the road to a freeway is \$43.5 (2000 dollars) from the City of North St. Paul to West edge of the City of Oak Park Heights, add \$100 million (2004 dollars) to construct freeway thru the City Oak Park Heights. From the City of North St. Paul Minnesota to Minneapolis Minnesota an upgrade of the freeway system is required with an additional lane of traffic in each direction with a cost estimate of \$120 million (2002 Dollars).

So the cost of the bridge itself is just the beginning.

The size of this bridge is out of scale with the need our region has now, and in the future, to move people to and from their jobs. And we have looked at smaller options in the past that would provide an adequate crossing and at the same time be in line with the Wild & Scenic River.

The Wisconsin and Minnesota Departments of Transportation recommendation for a high level, (150) feet above the St. Croix River (bluff to bluff bridge) and approximately 1 mile upstream from the existing bridge, was proposed as the preferred alternative, B-1, despite the fact that this alternative would cost \$20

million more than a replacement bridge next to the existing river bridge. The Riverway Managing Partners including the National Park Service, the state of Minnesota, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and others, objected to the plan and indicated the proposed bridge would have to comply with the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. Governors Anthony Earl of Wisconsin and Rudy Perpich of Minnesota announced that the states had selected a location for a replacement bridge in the corridor adjacent to the existing river crossing. The press release noted, "primary concerns include preserving the integrity of the St. Croix River Valley as a natural scenic waterway and the high cost of Corridor C." The April FEIS noted the reasons why the preferred crossing was not chosen "were perceived as (1) required too many agricultural acres; (2) causing too many farm severances; (3) being detrimental to the aesthetic qualities of the federal designated recreational segment of the Wild and Scenic St. Croix River; or (4) having bridge construction cost that were too high." The crossing has been open for more than 20 years serving the needs of the transportation system and the City of Prescott Wisconsin.

Now that the National Park Service has been able to reevaluate this massive bridge project under a new administration, the agency has determined that alternative B-1 would irreparably harm the Lower St. Croix's scenic and recreational values.

More fundamentally, Minnesota Department of Transportation is not the best authority for ascertaining environmental impacts to the Lower St. Croix. Indeed, MnDOT has twice proposed bridges that would violate the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Because the National Park Service is the designated steward of the Riverway, we should place far much weight on their judgments. And the NPS has found that construction of a massive bridge in the B-1 corridor would violate the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

Furthermore, the National Park Service and other Riverway agencies in a DEIS comment letter dated July 10, 1990 stated, "If a need for a new crossing is identified as a result of the above planning, we would recommend, as a matter of general policy, that such a crossing be placed in or near an existing transportation corridor. In the present case, this approximates the Central Corridor Alternative as depicted in the draft document."

This Central Corridor Alternative is the most cost effective choice as indicated in St. Croix Crossing, Benefit-Cost analysis Memorandum, dated May 5, 2004. The Central Corridor Alternative would be 20% more cost effective than the route selected. The St. Croix Riverway Agencies and Minnesota Taxpayers League

President Phil Krinkie agree this proposed project is not in the taxpayer's best interest.

Building a bridge in this corridor would also be consistent with the Management Plan for the Riverway, which states that (a) new bridges should be located within or adjacent to existing transportation corridors, and (b) that any new bridge "must be of a scale and character that minimizes impact to the values for which the [Lower St. Croix] was designated under the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (scenic, recreational, geologic)."

This Mega Bridge project would be detrimental to the people of The City of Oak Park Heights. In a study commissioned by the City in 2004, the city property tax base would be reduced by 17% and property owners viewing the St. Croix River would have home values reduced by up to 30%. This is equivalent to the Government taking 30% of the value of our homes, and this bill paves the way for just that.

The start date of the proposed project in 2013 is 100 years after Congressional action allowed the building of the Hetch Hetchy Dam in Yosemite National Park. The bridge project over the St. Croix River, if approved by Congressional action, will turn out to be the Hetch Hetchy of the Wild and Scenic Rivers System, potentially setting the stage to damage all Wild & Scenic Rivers. Mister Chairman, I invite you and the members of the committee to visit and view the St. Croix River from the Scenic Overlook in Oak Park Heights before passing the Resolution 850 and before the committee approves an exemption of bridges from the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

When the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed and the upper St. Croix River protected under the original legislation, the lower part of the river was to be studied for inclusion. In 1972 Congressional action added the lower St. Croix River into the Wild & Scenic River System. Since then property owners have followed the rules in the Riverway Management Plan required under the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. The Government must also comply with the plan and the Federal Government or equal protection under the law will have no meaning. I urge the Subcommittee not to change the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act to allow new river bridge crossings where none existed before.