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President
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**Testimony regarding the St. Croix River Crossing Project
HR850**

**House Natural Resources Committee
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands
Wednesday, May 4, 2011**

- Chairman Bishop, Ranking member Grijalva and members, my name is Curt Geissler. I'm the President of Lakeview Hospital in Stillwater. I'm here today on behalf of our hospital and five clinics that operate in both Minnesota and Wisconsin. I also believe I speak on behalf of the majority of our patients, employees and employers in both Minnesota and Wisconsin who badly need a new crossing to be built.
- I have also served on the Greater Stillwater Area Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors for 7 years, three of them as Board Chair, so I believe I can represent many employer positions in our economic region.
- And finally, like the Mayor, I am also a board member of the bi-state Coalition for the St. Croix River Crossing.
- Lakeview Hospital was founded in 1880, and has always served the medical needs of people on both sides of the river. Ironically the original hospital was built to provide health care for the lumber jacks working on the St. Croix River, the same river that needs our attention today. We are the eastern most hospital in the St. Paul/Minneapolis Metropolitan Area, and the only level 3 trauma center serving the region. We are proud of the high quality of care and the significant level of medical service we give to our Minnesota and Wisconsin communities.

- In addition to our Minnesota communities, our primary service area includes the Wisconsin communities of Somerset, and New Richmond, 30 miles into Western Wisconsin across the St. Croix River. Roughly one-third of our patients come from Wisconsin, as do about one-third of our employees.
- In raw numbers, each year approximately 20,000 hospital patients and 70,000 clinic patients are dependent on the river bridge crossing. Additionally, about 350 of our doctors, nurses and other health professionals depend on the bridge to get back and forth to work.
- Our ambulances must cross the bridge daily to respond to and provide care in emergency medical situations. We are the only advanced life support ambulance provider serving the geographical area in western Wisconsin. The current bridge causes significant delays to provide field and hospital care to patients.
- First, because the lift bridge operates every 30 minutes during peak summer areas, crossing delays are inevitable. Even though the bridge operator can be contacted to lower the bridge, the traffic backups that occur when the bridge is up cannot be quickly mitigated.
- In summer months, traffic backups can be over a mile long for people waiting to cross the bridge in either direction. Because the 1931 bridge was built without shoulders, our ambulances cannot cross the bridge any faster than traffic can be cleared. We have to either wait our turn in line on the bridge, or travel the 25 miles through Hudson to reach a location that is visible from Stillwater across the river.
- Some opponents of this project have suggested that a new bridge isn't necessary, because the round-trip to the Interstate 94 Bridge located in Hudson is only about 25 miles. Even ignoring the deteriorating state and safety of the 80 year old lift bridge, I can tell you that a new crossing is desperately needed.

- For people with critical injuries or in critical conditions, minutes count. If this was your or my loved one, you would not want timely medical care to be dependent upon a lift bridge schedule, or the amount of traffic on a particular time or day. Adding 25 miles onto an ambulance ride is unacceptable.
- When we know that the bridge will be closed because of spring flooding or repair work, or that traffic will be snarled because of community festivals and events, we pre-position an ambulance in Wisconsin. This is less than ideal and causes operational challenges. Also, it allows only one ambulance to serve Western Wisconsin and also prevents patients from being transferred to a hospital with higher level of care. Only lower-level critical access hospitals exist in western Wisconsin.
- As I mentioned, our hospital is a member of the Greater Stillwater Chamber of Commerce, and so we hear a great deal about the challenges that businesspeople have in getting their Wisconsin employees to work. Bridge traffic and frequent closures cause inefficiencies and delays that increase the cost of doing business on both sides of the river, and is a real impediment to job creation.
- A long-term bridge failure, one we ultimately will face in a matter of time, will have a negative economic impact not only on our hospital and clinical care, but on the entire Twin Cities Metropolitan economy. This is a crucial point: this section of the river is in an urban area, an urban area with a population of 3.2 million. Washington County, where Stillwater is located has a population of 234,000. We are vibrant and growing and our transportation system must reflect that.
- This bridge is on the National Highway System, the corridor is a major route to the east for a metro as I said with over 3 million residents. As well as the economic impacts, this has homeland security implications.

But when the Lift Bridge closes, the 18,000 cars per day currently crossing it will shift primarily to the Hudson Bridge – for a total of

32,000 more cars each day. The Hudson Bridge is the only major bridge crossing in our region, and this level of traffic is nearly 30 percent higher than what is presently forecast. There would be massive traffic problems on I- 94 leading in and out of St. Paul/Minneapolis.

While Lakeview Hospital and the Stillwater Clinics stand ready to care for the sick and injured, we cannot stand still and wait for a fracture-critical, functionally obsolete bridge to deteriorate further. A bridge failure that causes preventable injury or death would weigh heavily on our conscience.

In closing, I want to acknowledge that I've spoken a lot more about traffic than what this subcommittee might be used to hearing. But it is important that you understand the substantial impacts of delaying action any further.

We have had a river crossing in Stillwater since before statehood. Our communities have planned and prepared and waited over 50 years for this bridge. The Stakeholder Group has created a project that balances pressing transportation needs, historic preservation and environmental protection. We only need Congressional approval for it to move ahead.

We urge you to not delay the replacement of this bridge any longer. Please act this year to permit the St. Croix Crossing project to go forward.