

# TRANSIT for Livable Communities



Transit for Livable Communities, 626 Selby Avenue, Saint Paul, MN 55104  
Phone: 651-767-0298 E-mail: [tlc@tlcminnesota.org](mailto:tlc@tlcminnesota.org) Web site: [www.tlcminnesota.org](http://www.tlcminnesota.org)

May 3, 2010

The Honorable Congressman James Oberstar  
2365 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Congressman Oberstar:

As you know, the U.S. District Court in Minneapolis recently ruled that the National Park Service violated federal law in approving the St. Croix River Crossing Project proposed for Oak Park Heights, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup> The Court found that the current bridge proposal was essentially the same proposal that the National Park Service rejected several years before. This ruling provides an opportunity to reevaluate the bridge project in light of a changed economic, environmental, and transportation landscape.

Since the new bridge was first proposed, exurban growth has slowed to a trickle, the region has opened new rail lines with very positive results, and bike commuting has hit an all time high. In Washington, thanks to your leadership and a new Administration, federal transportation policy offers a new direction with a focus on repair of roads and bridges, greater investment in public transit, increased accountability, and improved environmental outcomes.

TLC believes it is time to reevaluate this \$670 million bridge proposal by taking into account new economic realities and this new federal direction. We ask you to consider the following:

- *Efficient use of existing infrastructure.* The Interstate 94 crossing at Hudson, just a few miles south of the proposed bridge, moves the majority of people and goods between Wisconsin and the Twin Cities and is currently below capacity.
- *There are better ways to address traffic congestion in Stillwater.*
  - *With a bridge scaled to the valley and the need.* A proposal for a less costly twin bridge close to the existing lift bridge was submitted during the planning process for the current bridge proposal. In the 1980s, a smaller bridge, rather

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<sup>1</sup> Sierra Club North Star Chapter v. LaHood, Civil No. 07-2593 (MJD/SRN), (D. Minn. Mar. 11, 2010). The decision affirmed that the current proposal is virtually identical to what the National Park Service itself vetoed in 1996. In his ruling Chief Judge Davis called the NPS's change in position "the hallmark of an arbitrary and capricious decision."

than the bluff-to-bluff bypass bridge that had been proposed, was built in the existing corridor leading to downtown Prescott, WI. That smaller bridge is serving the communities' needs.

- *With targeted transit.* *There is no local transit service in and around the Lower St. Croix Valley, very little express service to St. Paul, none to Minneapolis, and no shuttle service to Stillwater in the peak tourist season.*

A growing West Central Wisconsin Rail Coalition now exists in support of Amtrak and commuter rail service between Eau Claire and the Twin Cities. With its support and the recent publication of the new Minnesota State Rail Plan, the climate for passenger rail in Minnesota has changed dramatically.

All of these transit options can target the peak demands that contribute to congestion in downtown Stillwater. And expanded public transit service will generate the kind of green jobs you and the Administration have made a priority.

- *With more energetic transportation management.* Currently, there is no Transportation Management Organization serving Stillwater and the surrounding communities to work with employers and local units of government to encourage carpooling, flextime, transit, walking and bicycling, and telecommuting.

With historic and growing needs for repair of Minnesota's existing roadway infrastructure, investments in pavement and bridge repair should be a higher priority than building a new bridge. Minnesota has not met its goals for pavement repair for several years and the gap between road and bridge repair needs and available resources is projected to grow.

With consumer demand and the housing market at historic lows and with new public understanding of the personal costs of long-distance commuting, now is the time to use our transportation investments to strengthen existing communities, not subsidize and encourage development on agricultural land and open space in Wisconsin.

Chief Judge Davis's ruling provides an opportunity to implement much of the reform and evolution in surface transportation policy that your federal reauthorization embodies. We stand ready to work with you to improve transportation connections between Minnesota and Wisconsin, reduce traffic congestion in downtown Stillwater, and provide the kind of transportation options that the residents of Minnesota say that they want.

Sincerely,



Barbara J. Thoman  
Acting Executive Director

Cc: Congresswoman Betty McCollum  
Congresswoman Michele Bachmann