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Sensible Stillwater Bridge alternative would free up more than \$200 million for urgent Minnesota bridge repairs

ST. PAUL, July 12, 2011 — A partnership of Stillwater residents and business owners; and transportation and environmental advocates unveiled a sensible and affordable Stillwater bridge plan today that will protect taxpayers, Stillwater businesses and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, while ensuring more urgent bridge and road repair projects throughout Minnesota can be completed sooner.

The alternate design is estimated to cost about \$283 million — 59 percent or \$407 million less than the \$690 million freeway-style bridge championed by Congresswoman Michele Bachmann. Under that planned boondoggle, Minnesota would pay up to \$380 million with Wisconsin paying up to \$310 million, during a time of severe budget struggles in both states.

Peter Gove, board chair of the St. Croix River Association, the St. Croix River watershed citizens' group and member of the newly formed Sensible Stillwater Bridge Partnership, decried the wastefulness and irresponsibility of Rep. Bachmann's proposed bridge project. "It's too much bridge for too much money," he said. "We urge our elected officials to face the fiscal realities of this massive bridge project and opt for now our more practical and more affordable proposal."

The proposed Sensible Stillwater Bridge would accommodate today's and projected traffic demands, Gove said, and it could be completed within the same timeframe as the planned \$690 million mega-bridge.

A fiscally responsible bridge plan benefits all

With construction of the proposed Sensible Stillwater Bridge, Gove said Minnesota would save up to \$224 million and could reallocate those savings to repair or replace other structurally deficient bridges in the state. According to a recently published report by Transportation for America, one in 11 Minnesota bridges is structurally deficient and state revenues cannot keep pace with these urgent bridge repair projects.

The partnership presented its plans at the Wheelock Parkway bridge here, one of nearly 1,170 Minnesota bridges deemed structurally deficient by federal, state and local authorities. Like the Wheelock Parkway bridge, most of Minnesota's structurally deficient bridges are awaiting funding for repairs or replacement.

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“Everybody wins under this Sensible Stillwater Bridge plan,” said Gove. “Stillwater’s traffic congestion is eased. The St. Croix remains a national treasure, undamaged by the jarring view and noise of the proposed Bachmann Bridge. Taxpayers see fiscally responsible use of their tax dollars. And Minnesota residents see urgent bridge repairs happening at a much faster pace.”

The Stillwater City Council recently approved dropping \$80,000 into the coffers of those lobbying Congress and state officials in support of the \$690 million mega-bridge, Gove noted. “It’s time to end this taxpayer-funded campaign to build this boondoggle over the St. Croix to the detriment of taxpayers and a long-protected riverway,” he added. “Our elected leaders need to give serious consideration to our Sensible Stillwater Bridge plan, and stand up for taxpayers and the St. Croix River landscape.”

Sensible bridge plan balances traffic and business needs

As conceived by St. Croix Valley architects Tod Drescher, Beth Diem and Roger Tomten, the Sensible Stillwater Bridge plan utilizes a new lower and slower, three-lane bridge would cross the river diagonally, connecting Minnesota Highway 95 just south of downtown Stillwater to Wisconsin Highway 64 just east of the causeway approach to the Stillwater Lift Bridge.

Vehicle speeds on the Sensible Stillwater Bridge would be limited to 40 miles per hour, dramatically reducing noise and vibrations in the river valley, as compared to that generated by the proposed freeway-style bridge on which vehicles will travel 65 miles per hour. Travel on the Sensible Stillwater Bridge’s third lane would be managed by sophisticated traffic management technologies similar to those used by the Minnesota Department of Transportation to accommodate peak traffic demands on I-394’s MnPass lane.

The Sensible Stillwater Bridge would be as long as the proposed freeway-style bridge, but two-thirds as wide. At 60 feet from river surface to roadway deck, the Sensible Stillwater Bridge would set about 100 feet lower than the mega-bridge, but high enough to accommodate Stillwater riverboats and other tall vessels. In addition, the Stillwater Lift Bridge would be refurbished and dedicated to pedestrian and bicycle use.

Tomten, a Stillwater resident and business professional, said the Sensible Stillwater Bridge would best suit Stillwater businesses, enabling easy access to the historic downtown. He described the freeway-styled bridge as a “Stillwater bypass” that would forever harm the vitality and character of downtown Stillwater. “People traveling 65 miles an hour on that big bridge would just keep on driving,” he said.

Tomten added that the proposed high-speed, mega-bridge solution proposed by Rep. Bachmann would be a magnet for westbound tractor-trailer trucks seeking to avoid the scales and truck inspections at the Minnesota weigh station on I-94.

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Protecting a national treasure

Congress declared the downstream stretch of the Lower St. Croix Riverway a wild and scenic river in 1972, overseen by the National Park Service in response to construction of a coal-burning electric plant on the river's west bank years earlier.

The Park Service first rejected the expensive four-lane freeway bridge proposal in 1996. In response to an executive order issued by then President George W. Bush, the National Park Service reversed its decision in 2005. Five years later, the Park Service re-evaluated its mega-bridge decision and returned to its original conclusion: The proposed freeway-style bridge would have a "direct and adverse effect" on the Lower St. Croix's scenic, recreational and ecological values.

Considering the alternatives — an enormous bridge crossing the St. Croix bluff-top to bluff-top that scars the river's scenery, or a smaller bridge crossing from riverbank to riverbank that is within the alignment of the Lift Bridge — "we believe the National Park Service can embrace our Sensible Stillwater Bridge alternative," Gove said. "We believe our bridge can be up and running in the same time frame as the proposed Bachmann Bridge."

Urgent bridge repairs needed

The expenditure of \$690 million dollars on a bridge that would serve "a paltry 18,000 vehicle crossings a day is a disservice to residents of other counties who've been patiently waiting for needed bridge repairs," said Gove. "Every \$1 million spent on the excesses of the Bachmann Bridge is \$1 million dollars that could have been spent on urgent bridge repairs in other Minnesota counties." Repairs on the Wheelock Parkway Bridge could be accomplished for \$3 million, he added. Rural Mower County, he said, has been repairing five or six structurally deficient bridges a year for less than \$1.5 million.

According to 2009 statistics from the state Department of Transportation, Mower, Pipestone and Sibley counties have the highest proportion of bridges deemed structurally deficient, at more than 20 percent. Structurally deficient bridges in those three counties total more than 145 bridges.

More than 290 bridges, representing from 15 percent to 20 percent of all bridges in each of Fillmore, Houston, Hubbard, Lincoln, Redwood, Renville, St. Louis and Swift counties are identified as structurally deficient. And nearly 240 bridges, representing 10 percent to 15 percent of all bridges in each of 15 counties — Aitkin, Carlton, Carver, Chippewa, Clay, Cook, Faribault, Norman, Otter Tail, Rice, Roseau, Rock, Sherburne, Traverse and Waseca — are deemed structurally deficient.

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About the Sensible Stillwater Bridge Partnership: The partnership includes Stillwater residents and business owners, the National Parks Conservation Association, St. Croix River Association, Friends of the St. Croix, American Rivers, River Alliance of Wisconsin, St. Croix Scenic Coalition, Transit for Livable Communities and the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy.

For more information about the Sensible Stillwater Bridge, go to www.sensiblestillwaterbridge.org. Obtain updates on Twitter [@SensibleBridge](https://twitter.com/SensibleBridge).