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## Safe and Sound Bridges

JEFFERSON CITY — The tragic events of last week in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota are etched upon many of our minds. The twisted debris, the shattered pieces of concrete, and the vehicles dumped into the murky waters of the Mississippi River like so many discarded toys is something that we likely won't forget. And when you think about the tremendous loss of life in this catastrophe, it is surely something we should not forget. It's also a reminder of the need to fix this country's aging infrastructure, and it's a reminder that we started that process in Missouri long before the bridge collapse to the north.

There are more than 24,000 bridges in this state. In 2006, the Federal Highway Administration said about 4,600 are structurally deficient. Our own Missouri Department of Transportation (MoDOT) is responsible for 10,240 of the state's 24,042 bridges, and of those, 1,613 are considered structurally deficient, which means the structure is in relatively poor condition or has insufficient load capacity. Another 1,223 are functionally obsolete, meaning they have poor roadway alignments or clearance width restrictions that no longer meet the usual criteria for the system it serves. In our area, too many bridges in Missouri are in too bad of shape, but we've moved to correct that.

I have been urging MoDOT for increased safety measures, and the agency has responded. MoDOT is developing the "Safe & Sound" bridge improvement program to get 800 of Missouri's most worn out bridges in good shape and keep them that way for 25 years. In the St. Louis area, there are 24 bridges that are slated for fixing under the program with another eight in Lincoln County.

The people at MoDOT want you to know that no bridge that is too dangerous to cross or that is in imminent peril of collapse is allowed to be open. Immediately after the Minneapolis-St. Paul bridge collapse, MoDOT started an aggressive program to make sure similar type bridges in this state are safe. There are two bridges that have similar approaches, the pavement leading up to the bridge, to the one in Minnesota in our area: the Daniel Boone Bridge where Interstate 64/Highway 40 cross the Missouri River and the bridge over the Missouri River at Washington, Mo.. The outer road Interstate 44 bridge at Times Beach has a similar span to the one in Minnesota. Engineers are giving those bridges thorough inspections, and there is no indication any of these bridges are in any danger of collapsing. Every other bridge is inspected every other year (more often, if needed), and the folks at the transportation department emphasize that if there is a bridge that's unsafe, it will be closed immediately.

Your state transportation department is doing everything within its power to make sure the bridges... and the roads, for that matter... are safe to drive on. The recent success of the Smoother, Safer, Sooner program completed last December — a year ahead of schedule — improved the condition of about 2,200 miles of the worst roads in the state. Roads in the state saw a major upgrade to their conditions from just 47 percent considered in good condition in 2004 to 74 percent now considered good. MoDOT officials want 85

percent of our busiest highways in good condition by 2011. A recent survey of truckers nationwide said that Interstates 44 and 70 are among the nation's most improved highways.

Unfortunately, MoDOT's Amendment Three money, which helped fund the aggressive efforts to make our roads and bridges better and sooner, is drying up. In 2008, construction spending will be \$1.23 billion. By 2010, the amount goes down to just \$569 million. That means MoDOT will see a funding shortfall of \$18 billion over the next 20 years. There are several ideas for fixing this funding problem, but we'll have to put our heads together to figure out which one is best for our state.

In the meantime, please keep the families of the victims and the people of Minnesota in your thoughts and prayers as they deal with this tragedy.

If you have comments or questions about this week's column or any other matter involving state government, please do not hesitate to contact me. You can reach my office by phone at (866) 271-2844.

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