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Column for Week of:
August 6, 2007

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Safe and Sound on Our Bridges

Last week's tragic collapse of a large bridge spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota is etched upon the minds of many people throughout the country. As recovery efforts continue, questions come to mind of how could this happen... and what can be done to prevent the next tragedy from happening right here at home. This event has caused state officials to reexamine many bridges across the Show-Me State.

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, meaning the structure is in relatively poor condition or has insufficient load capacity. Another 1,223 are functionally obsolete, which means they have poor roadway alignments or clearance width restrictions that no longer meet the usual criteria for the system they serve.

Long before the tragic collapse in Minnesota, MoDOT had been 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 Kansas City area about 150 are on that list.

Just about every day, practically every one of us cross over some type of bridge on our way to work, home, or school. The folks at MoDOT want you to feel confident that every time you cross a bridge, it is safe. Right after the Minneapolis-St. Paul bridge fell, MoDOT started an aggressive program to make sure similar type bridges in this state are sound. There are two bridges in our area that have similar approaches to the one in Minnesota: the Route 291 bridge over the Missouri River and the Fairfax Bridge on Route 69 over the Missouri River in Platte County. Engineers are giving those bridges thorough inspections and there is no indication either of these bridges are in any danger of collapsing. All other bridges are inspected every other year, and the folks at the transportation department emphasize that no unsafe bridge is allowed to stay open.

Your state transportation department is doing all it can to make sure the bridges... and the roads, for that matter... are safe to drive on. As mentioned before, the agency recently completed the "Smooth Roads Initiative" that brought about a substantial improvement in our highway system. In 2004 just 47 percent of roads were considered to be in good condition but now 74 percent are considered good and MoDOT has set a goal of getting 85 percent of our busiest highways in good condition by 2011.

Unfortunately, MoDOT's Amendment Three money will soon dry up, and construction spending will go from \$1.23 billion in 2008 to just \$569 million in 2010 (a projected shortfall of \$18 billion over 20 years). Finding a solution to the funding shortfall looming on the horizon is something all Missourians need to be aware of, especially when we consider that poorly maintained roads and bridges will undoubtedly make driving in the Show-Me State more dangerous.

If you would like more information on the status of Missouri's bridges, MoDOT has provided a web site where you can find more information at:

www.modot.mo.gov/bridgeinspections/index.htm.

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 e-mail at matt_bartle@senate.mo.gov or by phone at (888) 711-9278. My web address is

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