



Transportation Building  
655 John Ireland Boulevard  
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155-1300

March 26, 1997

James R. Nobles  
Legislative Auditor  
Centennial Building  
658 Cedar Street  
St. Paul, MN 55155

Dear Mr. Nobles:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the evaluation report "Highway Spending." The report is helpful in highlighting our strengths, reconfirming the system's needs, and facilitating a discussion about the transportation issues that confront Minnesota. On behalf of the managers and staff of Mn/DOT, I wish to extend our appreciation for the constructive manner in which you have expressed the issues concerning highway spending in Minnesota.

The report confirms that beyond 2001 the Trunk Highway Fund may not be able to sustain the spending levels anticipated during the 1997-99 period. We share your concern that there is a backlog of bridges needing repair or replacement due to deficient structural conditions. The report also finds that, due to an aging roadway infrastructure, Mn/DOT may need to increase pavement preservation investments in order to maintain the quality of our highway system. Additionally, capacity is being exceeded on some highways, resulting in a significant projected increase in congestion.

While we agree with your conclusion that more preventive maintenance may be desirable, it is difficult to justify performing preventive maintenance on roads in relatively good condition when other roads and bridges are in worse condition. Your overall conclusion that projected funding is not adequate to address all of Minnesota's trunk highway needs is an important message for citizens and policy makers.

The report recommends using performance-based criteria to estimate funding needs of the trunk highway system and incorporating benefit-cost analysis wherever feasible. Performance measures have been developed throughout the Department, and we are beginning to link specific targets with the measures. During the last two years we have made substantial progress in incorporating benefit-cost into our discussions of expansion projects. We will continue with our management efforts to better define needs in terms of benefit-cost and performance-based criteria.

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We respect your suggestions to refine our Pavement Quality Index and develop a simplified bridge condition measure. However, we think it is unlikely that these refinements would significantly affect the needs identified in your report. For example, we feel that the \$71 million estimate represents the best projection we can currently provide, using the Pontis Bridge Management System and based on our engineering judgment.

Similarly, it is important to note that standards for low volume roads also will have negligible impact on highway spending. Geometric design standards do not force highway reconstruction; rather, deteriorating pavement condition forces reconstruction. As a result, your general conclusion that Mn/DOT revenues are probably not adequate to maintain the highway system and mobility of our citizens would not be changed even if we accepted your recommendation to adopt lower standards for low volume roads.

However, we do not agree with the report's suggestion to reject the Geometric Design Standards Task Force's recommendations in regard to lane width. Based on decades of experience in designing, constructing, and maintaining rural two lane highways, the Task Force concluded that a 32 foot road width, including shoulders, should be the minimum width when a rural road must be constructed or reconstructed. These standards are the most appropriate combination to adequately meet both user needs and cost effective operation and maintenance of the road.

The Department is committed to improving Minnesota's transportation system and continued discussion about how this might be accomplished.

Sincerely,



James N. Derr  
Commissioner