

January 28, 2008

The Honorable James L. Oberstar  
Chairman  
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee  
U.S. House of Representatives  
2165 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Oberstar:

Thank you for your correspondence of January 23, 2008. My colleagues and I on the Board value your opinions greatly, both as a long-time advocate of safe and reliable transportation infrastructure within the United States, and as one having particular interest in the mission and efforts of the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB).

First, I appreciate your recognition of and comments about the rigor of NTSB investigations, as well as our meticulous production process for official NTSB accident investigation reports. That NTSB process has been refined and tested over our 41-year history. I am in full agreement that we must protect the integrity of that process.

Additionally, I understand you are concerned about my recent statements regarding an ongoing investigation. I have reviewed my remarks from the press conference on January 15, 2008, concerning the interim recommendation the NTSB issued regarding the Minneapolis, Minnesota, I-35W bridge collapse. Specifically, I reviewed my comments, highlighted in your letter, that the gusset plates design “tells us why the bridge collapsed,” and my reference to the gusset plates as “the critical factor” in the collapse. Please be assured that it was not my intent to get ahead of the ongoing NTSB investigation or to hypothesize about the root and contributing causes of the bridge collapse.

As I am confident you are aware from your long experience in these matters, it is not uncommon for the NTSB to identify safety concerns during the course of the investigation that obligate us to issue urgent or interim recommendations before issuing the final report. That was the circumstance we faced in this instance. In doing so, however, it was not our intent to imply that we were eliminating other contributing factors from our continued analysis, or even to communicate that we have identified the cause or causes of the accident. There remains much to do before we can publish findings of that nature. That is why during the press conference I reiterated several times that the investigation was not yet complete, that the Safety Board has not made any determinations with regard to a probable cause, and that we would continue to consider all evidence in our analysis of the collapse.

In this instance, we did identify in recent weeks a matter of immediate concern. Based on analysis of the wreckage from the bridge and on preliminary findings of our finite element analyses of the stresses in the bridge structure, we determined that design errors were made in two locations, resulting in 16 of the 224 gusset plates on the bridge being seriously under-designed. All 16 of these gusset plates were found fractured, and we believe that the collapse sequence began with the failure of the under-designed plates at U10, one of the joints in the main center span. Although bridge inspection records did identify some areas of cracking and corrosion on the bridge, at this point in the investigation and I emphasize at this point, NTSB investigators found no evidence of corrosion in the gusset plates at nodes U10. We still have months of work to do in order to determine what confluence of factors caused the bridge to fail when it did, the straw or straws that broke the camel's back, if you will, and that work continues.

Accordingly, and consistent with NTSB practice, we issued our interim recommendation identifying this major issue dealing with the design calculations for the I-35W bridge, an issue about which we believed highway authorities nationwide should be informed. Although there is no reason to believe that any other bridge in the country has a design error of this magnitude, we do not want to proceed under such a hopeful assumption. That is why we have recommended that, for the thousands of "fracture critical" bridges around the country, no major renovation or operational change be made without first recalculating the stresses in all structural elements of the bridge, including the gusset plates. This will reduce the possibility that under-designed, but currently safe bridges, do not fail when additional loads are placed on them. The purpose of the recommendation, and the only intended purpose of the press conference, was for the NTSB to go on record with our concerns about under-sized gusset plates in bridges of this and similar design.

Finally, during the press conference, it was not my intent to characterize this single conclusion as the possible probable cause determination of the Board. In our desire to give this recommendation the weight we believe it deserved, the objective that day was to be as clear and careful as possible in sharing the facts, as we knew them at that point in time. That is, that the failure sequence of the collapse began with the U10 gusset plates, and those plates along with others were under-designed.

Congressman Oberstar, thank you for your continued support of this agency. You have long been a friend to and advocate for the NTSB and its mission. I can assure you that the NTSB, both its staff and the Board Members, remain committed to fulfilling the mission set out for it by Congress—to conduct thorough, objective investigations of transportation accidents and to make meaningful recommendations that, if followed, could prevent the recurrence of similar accidents in the future. The Board will continue to thoroughly explore and analyze issues related to the I-35W bridge collapse until the investigation is complete, and a probable cause or causes can be determined.

Again, thank you for your letter. Please feel free to call me if you have any further concerns.

Sincerely,

/s/

Mark V. Rosenker  
Chairman