STATE OF MINNESOTA

Office of Governor Mark Dayton

130 State Capitol ♦ 75 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard ♦ Saint Paul, MN 55155

February 28, 2012

The Honorable John Boehner
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232 The Capitol
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Mr. Speaker:

I respectfully ask you and the Members of your Caucus to support Representative Michele Bachmann's proposed legislation, which would allow the construction of a desperately needed new bridge across the St. Croix River between Wisconsin and Minnesota.

This new bridge is a top priority for both states. Increasing numbers of people are choosing to live near the western Wisconsin border and work or shop across the river in Minnesota, thus benefitting both economies. That commerce is now being severely constricted by the inadequacy of the existing Stillwater Lift Bridge.

That bridge is an 80-year old structure, which was placed on the National Registry of Historic Places in 1989. However, as an operational Lift Bridge, with frequent raisings to allow boats to travel the St. Croix River, it is a source of ever-worsening traffic congestion on both sides of the river, as traffic backs up to wait for the bridge to lower and resume vehicular traffic. Additionally, the narrow street network in downtown Stillwater and topographic constraints on the Wisconsin bluff cause further traffic congestion and severely limit opportunities to improve approaches to the bridge.

After 80 years of service, the Lift Bridge has aged and has significant structural, operational, and maintenance problems. The limitations of a two-lane historic bridge, the demands of raising and lowering the bridge, and ongoing maintenance and operations have raised concerns about safety on the bridge as well as on the approach roadways.

Twenty-eight different stakeholders representing a wide variety of interests worked collaboratively over several years to identify a new, mutually agreeable river crossing. Representatives from federal, state, and local government agencies and environmental protection organizations participated in the choice of the location and the design of the new bridge. The project has also received extensive public involvement and comment.

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The stakeholders identified extensive mitigation measures designed to restore some developed areas to a more natural state, preserve the existing natural resources in the riverway, implement growth management, and preserve historical resources. An earlier proposal for a steel/concrete girder bridge was abandoned in favor of an "extradosed" bridge, which would have more aesthetic appeal and fewer piers in the water – reducing the impact on the riverway.

This bridge was identified as the "Preferred Alternative" in the environmental process as the one, which best meets the two states' transportation needs with the fewest impacts on the natural, social, and cultural environment. All but one of the organizations agreed to allow the newly redesigned St. Croix River Crossing Project to move forward. The National Park Service (NPS) agreed to the project and its mitigation package in 2005.

In March 2010, the U.S District Court of Minnesota issued a ruling that vacated the 2005 NPS finding. This ruling prompted the Federal Highway Administration to request that the NPS conduct a new evaluation of the project. On October 15, 2010, the NPS announced a negative determination under Section 7(a) of the WSR Act due to the direct and adverse impact of the St. Croix River Crossing Project on the scenic and recreational values of the riverway. As a result, development activity has been almost completely suspended.

The NPS Section 7(a) negative determination under the WSR Act will not allow a new crossing of any type in a new crossing location. However, the WSR Act does contain a provision, which allows Congress to make an exemption from the Act. Representative Bachmann's proposed legislation would provide that needed exemption.

Well-intended organizations and individuals who oppose this project are now advocating for a "lower, slower" bridge, which they claim would be less costly and have less of a visual impact on the views of the river. Their activity suggests that the Stakeholder Review Process failed to consider an adequate range of alternatives in reaching its conclusion. That is not the case.

Stakeholders analyzed alternate locations and sizes and reached two major conclusions:

1) The alternate locations would have a greater impact on Section 106 properties, Section 4(f) park properties, and Section 7(a) bluff areas, floodplains, and wetlands than the preferred alternative; and

2) The alternative locations and designs would fail to meet the transportation needs of the project. It does not make sense to build an expensive bridge that fails to improve the immediate and long-term congestion problems facing the region.

If the proposed location for this new bridge were in a natural stretch of this beautiful river, I would not support it, regardless of transportation needs. However, the site is only about 50 yards south of the existing Lift Bridge, and borders the growing town of Stillwater. On its Minnesota side, the new bridge would be immediately adjacent to a coal-powered electricity-generating plant, which spews large plumes of smoke well above the bridge's level, and a glass manufacturing plant. Thus, it is by no means a scenic site of a scenic river. It is, rather, a cosmopolitan and industrial site, whose improved transportation is imperative to its future economic growth and social well-being.

Furthermore, subjecting this project to yet another stakeholder process and redesign would likely be its death knell. Both the federal and state funds, which Minnesota has reserved for this project, are time-sensitive. Thus, the choice is not between the proposed bridge and an alternative. It is between that bridge and no bridge for probably the next two decades.

The urgent need for this connection between Wisconsin and Minnesota has united Members of Congress and the Governors from both states and both political parties. We ask for your support of this legislation and your assistance in securing its passage by the U.S. House of Representatives.

Sincerely,

Mark Dayton
Governor

cc: Representative Michele Bachmann
Senator Amy Klobuchar