

Without solid infrastructure, a state is stuck

By **BARRY R. MCCAFFREY**

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Transportation infrastructure is critically important to our country and to Minnesota. As tragic as the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge was, it has brought national attention to an issue that has been neglected too long -- our nation's aging and antiquated transportation infrastructure.

I have traveled to Minnesota twice in the past year to discuss transportation infrastructure with government and Minnesota Department of Transportation leaders and airport administrators across the state. While safety rightfully has been the central concern of Minnesotans following last year's collapse, the threat of inadequate infrastructure not only places citizens at risk, it threatens the economic vitality of the state.

Infrastructure is the lifeline of our economy. Whether it is moving goods to and from the ports at St. Paul or Duluth, or via freight rail, or through Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, companies rely on this network for their existence. It is critically important to draw on the growth that Minnesota has been known for historically, and to ensure that companies like 3M, Best Buy and Pillsbury continue to find Minnesota an efficient place to do business.

The problems with America's transportation network are as serious as a heart attack. The veins and arteries of our country's transportation system are blocked by congestion and crumbling, aging infrastructure. Road congestion on highways and in cities slows the transport of Minnesota's agricultural goods, alternative fuels and technology equipment and reduces productivity of commuters. The Urban Mobility Study estimates congestion costs to the Minneapolis-St. Paul region are \$1.1 billion a year. While initiatives such as enhancements to Interstate Hwy. 494 are helping to address some of these issues, a more comprehensive set of solutions is needed to solve the transportation dilemma facing the state.

The growing and changing needs of our economy have far outpaced the investment and development of infrastructure required to support it. A report issued early this year by the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission said our country spends, as a percentage of gross domestic product, less than half as much on infrastructure today as it did in the 1960s.

We need a new prescription: a national transportation network for the 21st century. The major metropolitan centers in the United States that see the highest growth in business and economic opportunity recognize the value in a comprehensive transportation approach that relies on functional highways, as well as transit -- such as the Hiawatha light-rail and forthcoming Northstar commuter-rail corridors and airports that provide international access to Minneapolis-St. Paul. With the recent passage of a new transportation funding bill, Minnesota will be better able to improve and maintain these important transportation resources to meet safety and economic demands.

Through effective planning, development, protection and maintenance of this critical infrastructure, we can help secure Minnesota's critical transportation nodes to keep goods moving and Minnesota's citizens safer.

Retired Army Gen. Barry R. McCaffrey will be the keynote speaker at Wednesday's Minnesota Airports Conference. He is a military/security analyst for NBC News, chairman of HNTB Federal Services Corporation and an adjunct professor at the U.S. Military Academy.