TRIBUTE TO MS. ALMA ORTIZ

HON. SOLOMON P. ORTIZ

OF TEXAS

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, July 31, 2008

Mr. ORTIZ. Madam Speaker, I rise today to honor Ms. Alma Ortiz, a teacher of U.S. government and economics at Homer Hanna High School in Brownsville, TX.

Ms. Ortiz was selected to the House Fellows Program here in Washington, D.C., which provides an opportunity for teachers to learn more about government and improve their knowledge of Congress. Only twelve participants were selected from around the country.

Those teachers will then take their experiences and apply them to their lesson plans back home.

It is dedicated teachers like Ms. Ortiz who will ensure our students have a better understanding of government. She already has made a positive impact on her students, fellow teachers, and school administrators with her work ethic and enthusiasm.

It is important for our students to be engaged in the civic process. They are our future leaders and a key understanding of government, as well as an appreciation for history, is important for their success.

I congratulate Ms. Alma Ortiz on all her accomplishments.

FIRST ANNIVERSARY OF I–35W BRIDGE COLLAPSE

HON. JAMES L. OBERSTAR

OF MINNESOTA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Thursday, July 31, 2008

Mr. OBERSTAR. Madam Speaker, I rise lo mark the first anniversary of a tragedy in my home state, a tragedy that touches all Americans. At 6:05 p.m. on August 1, 2007, the I–35W Bridge in Minneapolis, Minnesota, collapsed into the Mississippi River, killing 13 people. The eight-lane, steel truss bridge span, which was constructed in 1967, carried approximately 140,000 vehicles daily.

Within just six minutes of the bridge collapse, emergency personnel responded to the scene, risking their own health and safety to rescue victims and to provide care to the injured. Within three hours, first responders were able to complete the rescue of victims stranded on the bridge. The swift and heroic actions of the first responders that day saved countless lives and were critical in minimizing the potential for more loss of life.

I received the tragic news of the bridge collapse while standing on the floor of this House, managing the Water Resources Development Act. The Transportation Committee staff and I immediately began developing legislation to help the City of Minneapolis, the Twin Cities metropolitan area, and the State of Minnesota cope with the loss of a major transportation artery, and rebuild after the terrible tragedy. The Committee approved my legislation the following morning, and the House passed H.R. 3311, authorizing up to $250 million to carry our emergency repairs and reconstruction of the bridge and $5 million for transit needs less than 48 hours after the tragedy occurred. To date, a total of $371 million in Federal funding has been provided for the cleanup and reconstruction of this crossing.

Construction of a replacement bridge on I–35W has moved swiftly. By late October, 2007, major work to replace the bridge had begun, and by mid-April of this year construction crews had reached the half-way point in the project. This week, crews will finish pouring the concrete on the final span of the new bridge as construction continues ahead of schedule. The new bridge is expected to open on December 24, 2008.

This tragedy demonstrates the need to make a commitment to invest in the maintenance, reconstruction, and replacement of our nation's surface transportation infrastructure. Many bridges, highways, overpasses, and transit facilities are being stretched to the limit of their design life and beyond.

Of the 599,766 bridges in the National Bridge Inventory, 25.4 percent of America's bridges—more than one in four—are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete. There are 72,524 structurally deficient bridges and 79,792 functionally obsolete bridges. According to the Department of Transportation (''DOT''), more than $65 billion could be invested immediately in a cost-beneficial way to replace or otherwise address existing bridge deficiencies.

Of particular concern is the condition of bridges on the 162,000-mile National Highway System (''NHS''), which consists of the 46,747-mile Interstate System, the Strategic Highway Network for military mobilizations, and other major highways. While the NHS makes up only 4.1 percent of total U.S. mileage, it carries 45 percent of vehicle miles traveled. NHS bridges carry more than 70 percent of all traffic on bridges. Of the 116,172 bridges on the NHS, including more than 55,000 Interstate System bridges, 6,175 are structurally deficient. Almost one-half of these structurally deficient NHS bridges are bridges on the Interstate Highway System, which has 2,830 structurally deficient bridges. The DOT estimates the current NHS bridge investment backlog to be $32.1 billion, including $19.1 billion for the Interstate Highway System bridge backlog.

While bridges are a key component of our nation's infrastructure network, these figures highlight the failure to make necessary investments in our nation's transportation infrastructure network. America's intermodal transportation network serves as the backbone of our economic security and competitiveness, as well as our quality of life. It facilitates the safe movement of people and goods, linking our communities to each other and to the world. The U.S. transportation system has served as a model for developing an interconnected network. However, in recent years we have been losing ground.

Many aspects of America's transportation network are operating at or near capacity. The Texas Transportation Institute, in its 2007 Urban Mobility Report, reported that in 2005 wasted fuel and time translated into a total congestion cost—or tax on the nation's drivers—of $78.2 billion—$5.1 billion higher than a year earlier. This congestion translates into millions of vehicles stuck idling on American roadways. This undermines our nation's economic competitiveness, productivity and quality of life. It has also contributed to a significant increase in transportation's share of U.S. green-house gas emissions.

Advances in logistics have turned our nation's roadways into real-time warehouses thanks to ''just in time delivery'', which builds greater efficiencies and cost savings into the system by allowing businesses to order parts and inventory stock in smaller batches. However, the increasing congestion on the nation's roadways threatens these efficiency gains. Truck transportation has increased its share of overall logistics costs for U.S. companies, reaching 77 percent of total logistics costs in 2007. Total logistics costs today account for 10.1 percent of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product in 2007, up from 9.9 percent in 2006.

With our nation's population expected to grow from approximately 300 million today to 420 million by 2050 and freight volumes expected to grow by 70 percent by 2020, future demands on our intermodal surface transportation network will require a bold new vision and approach to addressing the challenges of the 21st century, and a commitment to identifying the resources to carry out this new vision. Yet we continue to underinvest in infrastructure.

Earlier this year a Congressionally-chartered Commission—the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Commission—identified a significant surface transportation investment gap, and called for an annual investment level of between $225 and $340 billion—by all levels of government and the private sector—over the next 50 years to upgrade all modes of surface transportation (highways, bridges, public transit, freight rail and intercity passenger rail) to a state of good repair. The current annual capital investment from all sources in all modes of transportation is $85 billion.

We are now on the threshold of a transformational moment in the evolution of our surface transportation program. Next year, as Congress develops the next surface transportation legislation, we will face challenges in determining what the shape of our system should be and how best to finance it. This new era of transportation will challenge our imagination, our political will, and the tendency of all user groups to hunker down, think and act in insular ways—in self-interest, rather than in the common interest. We must begin now to rise above our differences, to find common ground in policies—and funding—that will best serve the nation's passenger and freight mobility and access needs in the 21st century.

Infrastructure is easily overlooked. It is always there, always functioning, always serving our needs. When infrastructure fails, though, as it did that day one year ago in Minneapolis, we are suddenly awakened to the fragility of our national transportation system. The collapse of this facility is a tragedy that policymakers and leaders around the country, and Americans in general, will not soon forget. The traveling public is looking to their government for solutions to ensure that such a tragedy will not happen again. We must take the lessons of the I–35W Bridge, and use them to create an accountable and reliable surface transportation program that guards the safety of all users.

It will be up to Congress and the next Administration to summon the political will necessary to create a surface transportation system that will serve as an engine of sustainable growth, underpinning and enhancing the greatest economy in the world, and ensuring the safety of American drivers.

We cannot walk away from this responsibility, and we can no longer afford to ignore it.