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NEW RCCAO STUDY RAISES CONCERNS ABOUT BRIDGE SAFETY IN ONTARIO

TORONTO (November 20, 2007) – A new report being released today warns that the integrity of Ontario's municipal bridge infrastructure can no longer be assured. After years of deferred maintenance, irregular inspections, and lack of government oversight, public safety is potentially at risk.

The report – *Ontario's Bridges: Bridging The Gap* – notes that recent bridge collapses in Laval, Quebec, and Minneapolis, Minnesota, highlight the “urgent need to take timely, responsible action to safeguard the public from potential infrastructure failures.”

Lack of Oversight

The study found that there is no single provincial agency responsible for ensuring that the estimated 12,000 municipal bridges in Ontario are being inspected at least every two years as required under the Public Transportation and Highway Improvement Act. As well, there is no central repository of bridge information for municipal structures. Uniform records have not been kept since 1997.

The Ministry of Transportation (MTO) is responsible for inspecting and maintaining the approximately 2,800 provincial bridges under its jurisdiction. But when it comes to municipal bridges, MTO takes the view that local governments are responsible for their own structures. There is no oversight, and “no assurance that municipal bridges in Ontario are safe and being maintained and operated properly,” the study concludes.

Aging Infrastructure and Deferred Investment

Commissioned by the Residential and Civil Construction Alliance of Ontario (RCCAO) and prepared by the MMM Group, the study notes that many of the bridges in the province were built in the 1950s and 1960s, and “it is expected that most structures will require costly rehabilitation or replacement after 50 years of life.”

Because of the lack of information on municipal bridge conditions, it is not known for certain what capital investment is needed to rehabilitate this aging infrastructure. But extrapolating from the data it was able to collect, the study estimates that at least \$2 billion will be required over the next five years.

Downloading of financial responsibility for these bridges has shifted much of this burden to local governments, and “a single structure requiring several million dollars in repairs can overwhelm the annual budgetary process of a small municipality,” the study states. Faced with other funding demands, municipalities have responded over the years by deferring bridge maintenance and rehabilitation work.

But with many bridges now nearing the end of their life expectancies, this tactic can no longer be followed. “Continuing on this path can only lead to negative consequences that will adversely affect public safety,” says the report.

Even the bridge rehabilitation funding on provincial highways appears to be inadequate. According to the Provincial Auditor’s report in 2004, almost one-third of provincial bridges were in need of major rehabilitation or maintenance based on MTO’s own figures, and it also noted that historical funding was not sufficient to cover this cost. A recent newspaper report found that only \$36 million of the \$210 million scheduled last year for bridge repair on provincial highways in the Golden Horseshoe was actually undertaken.

Unstable Funding

A number of recent funding initiatives – such as the Rural Infrastructure Investment Initiative (RIII), the Canada-Ontario Municipal Rural Infrastructure Fund (COMRIF), and the Ontario Strategic Infrastructure Financing Authority (OSIFA) – have provided some money from the senior levels of government to help municipalities address their immediate bridge improvement needs. But these have typically been one-time programs which do not solve long term needs or provide local governments with the stability to plan or program future work.

Questionable Inspections

Another concern identified in the RCCAO report is the competitive process used to award bridge inspection work. This process may be discouraging the use of higher cost state-of-the-art bridge testing technologies or work being undertaken by more highly paid but appropriate accredited professionals.

Recommendations

The study urges Ontario to take a leadership role by establishing a provincial body to:

- oversee and enforce bi-annual inspections of all bridges
- maintain a central inventory of bridges and collect standardized data on their condition
- prepare a comprehensive report that identifies the most urgent repair needs
- create a multi-year funding program
- ensure proper accreditation of individuals performing bridge inspections

“This study is a wake-up call on the deteriorating condition of municipal bridges in Ontario,” says Andy Manahan, Executive Director of the RCCAO. “We must aggressively address the situation in a coordinated way.”

“Let’s not wait for a disaster, like we did in Walkerton, before we start to fix the problem. Let’s acknowledge that there are hundreds of bridges that require rehabilitation on an urgent basis.”

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