

Minnesota's Transportation Bill Brings Hope to River Crossing Project

Minnesota's 2008 Transportation Bill will result in replacing up to 11 free-way and highway bridges by 2018, including the St. Croix River Crossing project, according to a draft report released the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT) in mid-June. Chapter 152 of Minnesota Laws 2008 calls for the development of a trunk highway improvement program for accelerating the repair and replacement of trunk highway bridges throughout Minnesota. If Mn/DOT's plan is adopted, all so-called Tier 1 and Tier 2 bridges in Minnesota would be addressed by June 2018. The price tag for this infrastructure work is estimated at \$2.5 billion.



This photo simulation (from the Minnesota shore) illustrates the proposed St. Croix River Crossing between Oak Park Heights, Minnesota and St. Joseph (St. Croix County) Wisconsin

Tier 1 bridges have the highest priority. The aging Lift Bridge in Stillwater, Minnesota is considered a Tier 1 bridge, and the proposed St. Croix River Crossing project is designed to replace it. The Lift Bridge would be converted to a recreational amenity for pedestrians and bicyclists. To qualify as a Tier 1 project, a bridge's sufficiency rating is at or below 50, or is identified by Mn/DOT's transportation commissioner as a priority project. The Lift Bridge once had a sufficiency rating of 2.8%, but that was before a \$5 million repair project was completed a few years ago. In May 2007 the rating was 42.8%, and a more recent estimate places it below 40%.

Under the repair and replacement plan, the river crossing project has a projected construction date of 2013 with funding in 2014. A previous schedule had the construction date as 2024.

Construction of a river crossing to replace the Lift Bridge has been stalled due to litigation by the Sierra Club. Mn/DOT and others expect the Sierra Club's lawsuit against the Federal Highway Administration to be resolved in advance of construction on the new river crossing.

"A new Stillwater Bridge is long, long overdue," said Wisconsin State Senator Sheila Harsdorf. "Minnesota actions will create an impetus for Wisconsin to follow. The two states have worked together well since we spearheaded a new stakeholder group to get this project done nearly five years ago. It is time to move forward on a new bridge."

United St. Croix Valley Legislative Days, a group of citizen advocates from St. Croix, Polk, and Pierce counties, has pushed for funding of the river crossing project since the inception of the Legislative Days event.

Mn/DOT is conducting a series of meetings through July to obtain feedback before the bridge repair and replacement plan is adopted.