

Statement of Roger L. Tomten, Resident and Business Owner
Stillwater, MN
Re: Public Witnesses Hearing
National Parks Subcommittee
Energy and Natural Resources Committee
U. S. Senate
July 28, 2011

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Paul, and members of the Subcommittee, for the record I am Roger Tomten, a resident and business owner in Stillwater, Minnesota. I appreciate the opportunity to testify on behalf of a growing number of Stillwater and Minnesota residents who support a new bridge across the St. Croix River between Minnesota and Wisconsin, but NOT the freeway style bridge prescribed in S. 1134.

Mr. Chairman, I understand that the bill you see here has cosponsors from both states and both parties and appears to have widespread support, but there is great controversy over this bill's recommended bridge design that reaches beyond Minnesota and Wisconsin. The bridge in this bill will forever change the character of Stillwater, Minnesota and the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway, the national park it is neighbor to. Just as troubling is the bill's methodology — the unprecedented exemption for a transportation project of this size and scale — opens the door for other incompatible development projects over America's Wild and Scenic Rivers. This bill put simply, neuters the 40-year protections embodied in the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act.

The bridge prescribed in this bill will cost nearly \$700 million at a time when Congress is fiercely debating our nation's spending and less than two weeks after the government of Minnesota resolved a lengthy shutdown over a five billion dollar state budget deficit. It would be the most expensive bridge in Minnesota history, costing more than two and a half times the \$265 million I-35 bridge that collapsed in 2007. Yet it would carry less than 30 percent of the traffic the I-35 bridge carries.

While advocates of this Bridge over the St. Croix lobby Congress and Minnesota officials to green light the \$690 million project, the state's bridge repair fund is struggling to repair or replace the estimated 1,170 bridges deemed structurally deficient. No doubt Minnesota's infrastructure crisis exemplifies our nation's infrastructure crisis.

The bridge prescribed in this bill is a 65-mile an hour, four-lane, freeway style bridge that was designed when the price of gasoline was less than two dollars a gallon. The enormous scale of this bridge was based on mid 1990s growth projections for new housing development — primarily in Wisconsin. That growth has slowed to a crawl, as it has throughout the country. And now the freeway bridge called for in S. 1134 would carry about 9,000 commuters daily, when there is already an eight-lane interstate bridge located just seven miles south.

The historic lift bridge, built in 1931, has been good for the city of Stillwater, but it is in need of repair as it simply cannot handle the traffic today. Over the years the bridge has become the symbol of the city, bringing thousands of national park visitors into the town. These visitors have significantly boosted the economy in our small downtown area. The way the bridge prescribed in this bill is designed — going from blufftop to blufftop, about a mile south of our downtown core — it will be very difficult for travelers to find their way into a downtown Stillwater business. Instead, cars will go whizzing past downtown on a

new freeway-style bridge and permanently altering the economic vitality of our historic commercial core.

There is an alternative, more sensible bridge design that is gaining growing support among Stillwater and Minnesota residents, with national park supporters, and transportation and taxpayer advocates who see it as a pragmatic and sensible option to the Boondoggle of a Bridge in this legislation. Our Sensible Stillwater bridge would cost less than \$300 million, be more respectful of the St. Croix River it graces, and continue to bring scores of visitors to downtown Stillwater, while managing traffic flow and easing congestion for commuters. Construction of this bridge could be completed in the same timeframe as the big freeway-style bridge. Speeds on the Sensible Stillwater bridge would be limited to 40 miles per hour, reducing noise and vibration in the river valley, so that the valley will retain the serene character that it is known for.

The Lower St. Croix River, where the city of Stillwater is located, has been protected as part of the St. Croix National Scenic Riverway in the National Park System since 1972. Congress voted to protect the Lower St. Croix after Northern States Power built a coal-burning power plant on the river's edge. Industrialization along the St. Croix south of Stillwater had to stop. And Congress stopped it with the Wild and Scenic designation.

I understand that proponents of the mega-bridge point to the coal-fired plant as justification for their bluff-top to bluff-top bridge. Such an explanation completely defies the primary reason why the St. Croix became a federally protected river — To prevent more eyesores like the King Power Plant that scar the inherent beauty of the St. Croix.

Action by environmental visionaries like Walter Mondale and Gaylord Nelson prevented any additional industrialization. And the unsightliness and noise and pollution that came along with it. The Wild and Scenic River Act protected the St Croix River Valley for boating, canoeing, fishing, hiking, birdwatching. And just simply enjoying the scenery and solitude. And for nearly 40 years, those protections have held firm.

Proponents of S.1134 indicate that all alternatives were studied in the mediation process held from 2003-2006. As a stakeholder in that mediation process, I can assure you, this was not the case. Only high-speed freeway-style solutions were analyzed. Our Sensible Stillwater Bridge proposal establishes a slower design speed, builds a smaller bridge lower to the water, eliminates the commuter traffic from downtown Stillwater and meets the traffic needs of the area all for less than half the price. This is backed up by fact that several other members of the mediation process, the St. Croix River Association and the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy have dropped their support for the bridge proposed in S.1134, and now support our Sensible Stillwater Bridge.

The bridge prescribed in S.1134 headlined a feature story on out-of-control spending in the July 19, 2011 front page section of the New York Times: "...local officials and members of Congress have pushed for a new four-lane bridge over the St. Croix River that was co-sponsored by Representatives Michele Bachmann and Sean Duffy...Opponents labeled the bridge an earmark, but they defend the spending by arguing that it was not an earmark. The legislation calls only for a bridge to be built."

The thought of forgoing the protection of the Wild and Scenic River Act to benefit roughly 9,000 daily commuters is wrong. And to move this mega-bridge plan forward when our nation is locked in debate over spending and the state of Minnesota is coping with a \$5 billion budget deficit makes no sense. The

community of Stillwater needs a new bridge to replace the historic lift bridge, but not the one prescribed in this bill.

It is too much bridge at too high a cost for my state and my community.