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Privatizing Bridge Design Is Just Asking For Trouble

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In the wake of the Twin Cities bridge tragedy, we are all paying renewed attention to our national infrastructure and the dangers of deferred maintenance. The state of Wisconsin engineers responsible for designing our bridges have a special perspective that's up close and personal.

We're engineers, but we're also taxpayers and citizens. We care about our work, and we feel a strong responsibility to provide for the public's safety. Our perspective is that the Minnesota tragedy re-emphasizes the need to have a suitably sized staff of qualified and well-trained public employees to serve the public interest not just to ensure our bridges are safe, but to promote public safety across the board.

The good news is that most national measures indicate that Wisconsin's bridges are relatively well-built and maintained. The bad news is that this may change if public policy continues to be twisted toward private outsourcing, as it has been for many years.

The State Engineering Association represents 1,100 state employees in professional engineering occupations. Among our members are exactly seven engineers and six computer-aided design specialists devoted to designing public bridges.

According to a 2005 survey by the Missouri Department of Transportation, for each Wisconsin design engineer there were 979 public bridges in Wisconsin. That was by far one of the highest ratios among the 33 states surveyed. Other states had ratios as low as one design engineer per 50 bridges.

The study showed that 75 percent of the design and engineering work on public bridges in Wisconsin is done not by public servants but by private firms, which may not be around after the contract is completed and if problems develop. Only seven other states in the 2005 survey had equal or greater dependence on private contractors. On average, states relied on public engineering staff to do about half of all bridge design work.

Bridge and road safety means ensuring that we Wisconsin taxpayers have a public work force equal to the task of watching over these public assets. Of course government needs to work with private consultants from time to time, but that partnership needs to be kept in a balance that preserves strong public oversight and delivers the biggest bang for the buck.

A healthy environment and safe public infrastructure depend on good government. That's good as in "professional," "cost-effective" and

"public-minded." As the Wisconsin Department of Transportation's own study not long ago revealed, outsourcing highway engineering work to for-profit contractors costs 18 percent more than doing the work in-house.

That means either the portion of income taxes used to pay for transportation contracts rises by 18 percent, or else you get fewer reconstructed road miles, fewer bridges rebuilt or some other substantial cut. Add to that the myopic dangers in stretched lines of authority, and political sweetheart deals that trump sound public policy, and you have a blueprint for trouble.

Yet the Assembly version of the state budget bill cuts 25 Department of Transportation engineering professionals. The savings are to be converted not into lower taxes but into more work for high-paid consultants who will walk away from the project when it's done. Increasingly, in our state and the U.S., transportation spending is, as the New York Times reports, assigned according to "the political muscle of lawmakers, rather than dire need." The Minnesota tragedy is another powerful argument why we need to reverse the de-professionalism occurring at all levels of government, state government in particular. In short: It should be the public interest not the special interest that drives this vital work.

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