

## **ASCE Liquid Assets: Summary from MN ASCE December Section Meeting.**

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As part of ASCE's continuing efforts to raise awareness about our infrastructure needs, the MN Section of ASCE and the MN Chapter of APWA(MPWA) co-hosted a panel discussion about Minnesota's infrastructure at a luncheon on December 16, 2009. The panel consisted of:

Moderator:

Honorable George Latimer, *former Mayor, City of St. Paul*

State Representative Alice Hausman, *Chair Capital Investment Finance Division*

Dr. Roberto Ballarini, *Head of the University of Minnesota Civil Engineering Department*

Margaret Donahoe, *Executive Director, Minnesota Transportation Alliance*

Dave Sonnenberg, P.E., *Stanley Consultants, former Minneapolis Director of Public Works*

Attendees included members from American Society of Civil Engineers - Minnesota Section (MN ASCE) and Minnesota Public Works Association (MPWA). State Representative Jenifer Loon (Eden Prairie) also attended.

MN ASCE Section member Tim Davis (Consolidated Photo) provided photographs for the ASCE Section Website and Newsletter; and he also video-taped the meeting to test placement of the video on the ASCE Section Website.

The goal of the panel discussion was to explore how Minnesota's engineering associations can better work together to craft and deliver a message to the public, policy makers that infrastructure requires adequate funding to both maintain existing facilities and to provide new facilities to meet the demands of a growing population.

The panel discussion began with Dr. Ballarini discussing the effects of decaying infrastructure on national security and culture. He provided examples of how the Romans understood that infrastructure allowed them to maintain a secure empire. Today, we view infrastructure as essential for commerce and safety, noting the interstate highway system. Dr. Ballarini went on to state that our infrastructure includes museums, sports venues, cultural attractions, and educational facilities. He reminded attendees that education creates higher quality of life so we must continue to invest in education. Dr. Ballarini explained that when we get complacent, or used to mediocrity, then we tend to ignore our infrastructure resulting in decaying infrastructure. America's position as a world power was fueled in part by our investment in education and infrastructure following World War II. Since then, our investment in infrastructure has fallen drastically (from 4% of GDP to less than 2% of GDP). Future prosperity will need to be driven by development of new technologies – likely related to the green movement. Dr. Ballarini concluded by challenging attendees that it is the engineering community that must educate citizens on the importance that infrastructure plays in our economic and national security. This must be understood by citizens before they could support increased funding to address our infrastructure needs.

Dave Sonnenberg provided real-life examples of how we used to fund infrastructure and how this has diminished over the years. He provided funding scenarios that the City of Minneapolis faced in 1997. Back then, it was recognized that Minneapolis would need to spend twice the money allocated to infrastructure to maintain what existed at that time. He provided his viewpoint that today the culture seems to live for the moment and not worry about tomorrow. Realistically, he stated that infrastructure funding choices are: 1) continue underfunding—bad for infrastructure and the

economy, 2) re-budget from other areas of spending, and/or 3) raise taxes. He noted the current political climate suggests underfunding will continue. He stated that as a society, we need to make societal and personal sacrifices to reverse this trend. He challenged the engineering community to stand up and make people listen, and to educate the elected officials and the voters so they recognize the importance of properly funding our infrastructure.

Margaret Donahoe provided suggestions for how to be a better advocate. She explained that legislators need to hear about infrastructure issues from their constituents. She also explained that broad support from the business community is also very important to strengthen the message. A few years ago when the legislature finally enacted a gas tax increase, the message was that the unmet need was \$1 billion a year for the trunk highway system, and \$1.7 billion a year when transit and local systems were included. Today, the message includes all modes of transportation, and the unmet need is \$3 billion a year. The challenge remains how to motivate voters. This can only be accomplished with powerful messages such as 1) quality of transportation system impacts safety, 2) economic development is spurred by a quality transportation system, and 3) quality of life degrades as infrastructure degrades (no one likes being stuck in traffic as this costs time and fuel). She noted that people are willing to pay if they know/see where the money is going. There are ways to raise revenue responsibly.

Rep. Hausman began by stating “when the people lead the leaders will follow.” She explained that this year in the State’s biennium will be a “bonding year”. She asked “why is bonding important in a struggling economy?” She reiterated that Minnesota has major infrastructure needs that take time to address. Therefore, for Minnesota’s economy to flourish when economic recovery occurs, we need to have adequate infrastructure in place to support a recovering / growing economy. A bonding bill in this economic climate continues to make sense – Minnesota has experienced plenty of bidders for bond sales at low interest rates, and bids for infrastructure projects are coming in about one-third lower than estimated. These facts mean taxpayer dollars are going further. She also noted that State demographers are projecting the population of the Twin Cities to increase another one million over the next twenty years. Critical infrastructure such as transportation, water and wastewater systems must be in place before this population arrives. Since these types of infrastructure can take many years to plan and implement, now is the time to start addressing this need. She reminded attendees that MN state debt per capita remains low - 42<sup>nd</sup>. She provided a hand out illustrating the effects of various bonding bill amounts. She noted that when the I-35W Bridge collapsed, we responded. She hopes that we do not need other crises to respond to our infrastructure needs. She closed by stating that infrastructure should not be a partisan issue, but today’s political climate has made it a partisan issue. These items tend to be magnified by the media and that hurts infrastructure policy.

Honorable George Latimer moderated a Question and Answer session between attendees and the panelists.

The overall discussion confirmed that the engineering community will need to work together to deliver the infrastructure message to citizens in a way they can comprehend the need. An analogy was offered that people understand that the roof of a home must be replaced after a number of years, so we might be able to relate the maintenance needs of infrastructure in such a way. Similarly, expansion needs of infrastructure might be compared to providing a new bedroom when a new child arrives in a family.