

History of the Joint Committee to Investigate the Bridge Collapse

On August 14, 2007, the Subcommittee on Committees of the Committee on Rules and Administration of the Senate, and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, appointed a joint committee to investigate the collapse of the I-35W bridge. The Committee consists of eight members of the Senate and eight members of the House, with Senate and House co-chairs.

The Committee was directed to do a comprehensive review of all decisions potentially relevant to the bridge collapse, within the context of MnDOT's general practices relating to bridge inspection and repair. The committee was directed to examine the extent to which the decisions that permitted the I-35W bridge to deteriorate to the point of collapse were similar to those made regarding other bridges, the extent to which other bridges are in peril, and how the bridge maintenance and replacement program must be changed to ensure that no more bridges fall down.

The Committee was charged with examining the Minnesota Department of Transportation's decision making in response to bridge inspection reports done over the last 40 years, especially those done since 1990.

The Committee was to conduct its review and make its recommendations to the legislature using an open and public process that provides Minnesotans with assurance that any past practices and policies that have been identified as contributing to the tragedy have been corrected.

The Committee was also charged to examine MnDOT's response in the aftermath of the disaster and whether the agency is adequately staffed and funded to inspect, maintain, repair, and replace highway bridges.

The Committee's charge said it was not intended to duplicate the efforts of the National Transportation Safety Board to identify the physical failures of this particular bridge that caused it to collapse.

The Joint Committee temporarily suspended its investigation a week later, when the Legislative Auditor was directed to begin a program evaluation of the state highway and bridge program. On October 3, 2007, the Joint Committee requested the legislative leadership to provide the necessary funding and to establish a working group to hire outside professional assistance. On November 19, 2007, a Proposal for Investigation, establishing a Hiring Committee and specifying its duties, was finalized. On December 19, 2007, the Joint Committee contracted with the law firm GRAY PLANT MOOTY of Minneapolis to serve as its Special Counsel for the investigation. The firm named Robert A. Stein, former Dean of the University of Minnesota Law School and former Executive Director and Chief Operating Officer of the American Bar Association, as its lead investigator.