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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BRIDGE INSPECTIONS CRITICAL TO PUBLIC SAFETY

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Ever since man began to wander around the earth, we have depended on bridges to get from one side of something to the other. Due to their design or history some bridges are familiar - London Bridge, the Brooklyn Bridge and the Golden Gate, for example. Motorists and other roadway users however, do not give most bridges a second thought as they bustle from place to place. While current policy and practice for the thorough inspection, diligent maintenance and timely repair of the nation's bridges should provide some confidence, such was not always the case.

After a number of high-profile bridge failures, including the sudden collapse of West Virginia's Silver Bridge in December 1967 which tragically claimed 46 lives, the Federal Highway Act of 1968 required implementation of a national bridge inspection standard and development of a program to train bridge inspectors. In 1971 the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) adopted the National Bridge Inspection Standards (NBIS) which includes inspection procedures, frequency of inspections, qualifications of personnel, inspection reports and maintenance of state bridge inventories. In 1972 the FHWA initiated the National Bridge Inventory (NBI) as the repository of information for all highway bridges of 20 feet in length or longer. The NBI currently holds data on approximately 590,000 public roadway bridges that cross rivers and other roadways, or otherwise tie the highway system together. There are approximately 14,300 public roadway bridges in Wisconsin.

Monroe County has more bridges than any other "rural" county in Wisconsin with a total of 359 including state and interstate highways (157), county highways (80), town roads (101), village streets (5) and city streets (15). The Highway Department performs routine maintenance on state highway bridges and is responsible for the design, construction, maintenance and repair of all county highway bridges.

All bridges listed in the NBI are required to be thoroughly inspected at least every 48 months with the considerable majority requiring inspection at least every 24 months. Those meeting certain criteria must be inspected even more often. All inspections must include the review and rating of key elements that make up the deck, substructure and superstructure of the bridge. The Wisconsin Department of Transportation (WisDOT) administers the Bridge Inspection Program through its Bureau of Structures. All bridge inspections and bridge inspectors must meet the qualifications and criteria established by WisDOT and the FHWA. The Highway Commissioner in each of Wisconsin's 72 counties is responsible for administering their county's bridge program including all bridges on county highways, town roads and city and village streets. The Highway Commissioners are responsible for ensuring that all inspections meet the adopted standards.

The Monroe County Highway Department has contracted, since 2016, with Jewell Associates Engineers to perform bridge inspections and to serve as the Bridge Program Manager. Jewell Associates was recently awarded a contract to continue in that capacity for the 2024-2025 bridge inspection cycle. Beginning in June, certified inspectors for Jewell Associates will complete inspections on all county highways and for Monroe County's 2 cities, 7 villages and for 21 of the 24 towns in the county. Jurisdictions electing to employ a vendor not affiliated with the county's Bridge Program Manager will be assessed a Quality Control fee along with the cost of the inspection, while the other jurisdictions pay only for the cost of the inspections. The Bridge Program Manager coordinates inspection schedules and performs Quality Control measures established by the FHWA and WisDOT.

Detailed reports are produced for each bridge and sent to the structure's owner, and include a list of maintenance and repairs that must be completed to ensure the structural integrity and performance of the structure. Each jurisdiction is responsible for properly addressing the maintenance and repair items. Completed reports are entered into WisDOT's Highway Structure Information System.

If an inspection reveals a sufficiency rating of less than 50%, or if a key element of the bridge has a rating of less than 4 (out of 10), it may be eligible for replacement under the WisDOT Local Bridge Improvement Program, a federally supported program that pays for the rehabilitation or replacement of failed or failing structures.

The Local Bridge Improvement Program operates on a two-year cycle. Monroe County was awarded a total of seven replacement bridges in the 2024-2025 cycle, three on county highways and four on town roads; CTH T (N / STH 71) over Moore Creek, CTH T (S / STH 71) over Moore Creek, CTH A over Indian Creek, Interior Road over Lemonweir Creek (Town of Tomah), Ellsworth Road over Branch Mill Creek (Town of LaGrange), Nordale Road over East Branch Kickapoo River (Town of Sheldon) and Fairmont Avenue over Upper Big Creek (Town of Sparta). The replacement bridges are currently programmed for construction in 2026 or 2027.

The town road bridges and one county highway bridge were awarded 100% funding for design and construction, with the owner responsible only for incidental costs, the other county bridges were awarded 80% funding for design and construction. The average, estimated, cost of design and construction of each of the town road bridges is \$650,000.00, the average estimated cost of the county bridges on CTH T (N/STH 71) and CTH A is \$760,000.00 and the estimated cost of the CTH T (S/STH 71) bridge, which projects to be a multi-span structure, is over \$1.7 million.

In 1967, the same year the Silver Bridge collapsed, the Interstate 35W bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis opened to traffic, only to suffer a similar fate 40 years later, taking the lives of 13 people and injuring another 145. The catastrophe sparked renewed interest in how the nation's bridges are inspected and maintained. An investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board eventually settled on a 40-year-old design flaw as the primary cause of the failure, but also noted decades of deferred maintenance of the structure; as early as 1990 the bridge was rated as "structurally deficient". Some officials questioned how such a design flaw would have not been noted through 4 decades of inspections.

Bridges play a critical role in the nation's surface transportation system and the Monroe County Highway Department is committed to ensuring that the bridges in Monroe County remain safe. The Highway Department actively supports its local jurisdiction partners in the inspection, maintenance and replacement of their bridges. In addition to administering the county's bridge programs, the department is available to assist local jurisdictions with repairs, as requested.

For further information please contact the Monroe County Highway Department at (608) 269 - 8740 or via e-mail at highways@co.monroe.wi.us.

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