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NEWS RELEASE

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Don't Take a Hike **by Senator Larry Craig**

Like most Idahoans, I watched the story of the Minneapolis bridge collapse unfold with a great sense of sadness. It was also incredibly unsettling to think about something we take so much for granted – our roads and bridges – failing so disastrously under such normal circumstances. In the days since this tragedy, reports have begun to roll in about the sorry state of the nation's bridges. While Idaho is better off than most states, we have a fair share of deteriorating bridges. Unfortunately, many of my colleagues in Congress are pushing to solve this situation by means that would be equally disastrous to our economy.

The states and the federal government generally cover road and bridge-building expenses with revenues generated by gas taxes. Billions of dollars will be required to repair or replace the thousands of aging bridges in the United States. Some in Congress have argued that the best way to avoid another disaster like the Minneapolis collapse is to raise the federal gas tax. I disagree.

Currently, the federal gas tax is about 18 cents per gallon. According to a study done in 2004, raising that tax to 23 cents per gallon, as has been proposed, would result in \$8 billion less in personal savings per year. Most financial experts agree that Americans already don't save enough money. Exacerbating that problem doesn't seem very wise to me.

Also, raising the gas tax would disproportionately burden working families, because they spend a greater percentage of the family budget on gas than wealthy families do.

Anytime taxes go up, whether income taxes, corporate taxes or otherwise, it slows economic growth. Higher taxes take money out of the economy, where it could be creating jobs and generating income, and puts it in the hands of government bureaucrats, who are notorious for mismanagement and inefficiency.

Having said all that, I do believe that Congress must act to address the problem presented by our aging transportation infrastructure. The question is how to address it, without increasing the tax burden on workers and families, or depressing economic growth.

One important step is to reassess our priorities in transportation. If we examine how the federal government and the states spend their transportation funds, we find that a lot of money is spent on peripheral projects that have little to do with improving the safety of our nation's travelers.

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Don't get me wrong – I enjoy driving on a highway that has green grass in the median and landscaping at the interchanges. And I'm sure people living near a freeway appreciate having a noise barrier to reduce the constant noise of passing cars and trucks.

But are projects like these central to traveler safety? Obviously, putting such projects on hold wouldn't cover all our needs, but few would disagree that a reevaluation of funding priorities is needed right away. It would also help the situation for Congress to exercise greater oversight in the future, to find out if federal funds intended for the building and maintenance of roads and bridges are actually being spent for those purposes.

Finally, we ought to take another look at finding new or better ways to finance the upkeep of our highways and bridges – ways that take advantage of the ingenuity and efficiency of the private sector, if possible. When the Senate returns to Washington in September, I'll be looking for ways to solve this problem without telling Idaho families to take a hike – a gas tax hike.