

United States Senate

February 15, 2024

Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue, SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Buttigieg:

I write today regarding an urgent situation in Bigfork, Montana. Late last month, safety inspectors closed the Bigfork's Bridge Street Bridge to both car and pedestrian traffic after an inspection identified "severe corrosion" and other structural concerns. This historic bridge is critically important to the economic success and safety of the Bigfork community, which is one of Montana's most popular summer tourism destinations. In the coming weeks, I ask that you prioritize working with the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) and the local community to develop a plan to swiftly deploy funds from my bipartisan infrastructure legislation to address this bridge closure and restore traffic flow to the community.

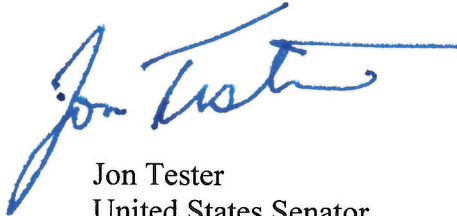
The historic Bridge Street Bridge is one of only two roadways that connects popular downtown Bigfork with Montana Highway 35. I am concerned about the immediate effects that this bridge's closure may have on the ability for local residents and tourists to travel to and from Bigfork's main street. While Bridge Street Bridge is closed, Bigfork residents who use the bridge to walk to school or work will need to walk instead along Highway 35, which is unsafe to navigate by foot. Those who would normally drive across Bridge Street Bridge will also be rerouted to Highway 35, and increased vehicle traffic on the highway is sure to cause congestion and accelerate wear and tear. Furthermore, Bridge Street Bridge serves as a vital exit should an emergency occur downtown.

I am also concerned about the effects that this bridge closure may have on Bigfork's economy, which is largely driven by tourists who visit during the summer months. Tourism contributes \$506 million to Flathead County's economy each year, and many of those who travel to Flathead County visit Bigfork, where they can access Flathead Lake and attend annual events like the town's Whitewater Festival and Fourth of July Parade. I am concerned that Bridge Street Bridge's closure will significantly impede tourists' ability to travel to and from Bigfork, and in some cases, may dissuade them from visiting altogether.

In April 2017, the Flathead County commissioners approved a proposal to replace the bridge with a similar 120-foot steel truss structure, and I understand MDT initially scheduled work to begin in 2023. Unfortunately, it appears this project was delayed until 2026 with lack of funding availability as a key contributor. I understand bridge replacement projects can require significant investments. That's why in 2021, I helped to write and pass the bipartisan Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which appropriates funds each year for the Federal Highway Administration's (FHWA) Bridge Formula Program. This year, Montana will receive \$45 million through this program, \$6.75 million of which must be used for off-system bridges like the Bridge Street Bridge. It appears to me that repair or replacement of the Bridge Street Bridge would be an excellent use of Montana's Bridge Formula Program funding.

I appreciate your agency's continued efforts to improve our nation's bridges, and I ask that you act rapidly to support Montana's efforts to replace the historic Bridge Street Bridge. I stand ready to work with you on this important matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jon Tester", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Jon Tester
United States Senator