

## **Blue Earth County Commissioner and NACo President Colleen Landkamer**

Colleen Landkamer made history in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, by becoming the first woman ever to serve as County Commissioner when elected in 1988. In rural southern Minnesota, Landkamer represents a constituency within the county seat of Mankato, which is a regional center providing services to a population of over 222,000. The Mankato area also serves as an educational center, which includes Minnesota State University, South Central Technical College, and two small private colleges.

Landkamer, a former aide to Congressman Tim Penny, has an enormous passion and energy for county government. She has brought the concerns of counties to the national stage since her involvement in forming the National Association of Counties Rural Action Caucus (RAC) in 1998. Landkamer's enthusiasm for RAC helped take it from an organization of 20 members to several hundred. Landkamer chaired RAC from 1998 to 2001, and currently serves on NACo's Executive Board as President, as well as Women of NACo and the RAC Steering Committee. On the national transportation level, Landkamer is serving on a visioning AASHDO working committee focusing on highway system preservation, performance and capacity for the future of the U.S. highway system.

Landkamer maintains a strong commitment to her constituency in Mankato where she remains active with the Judicial Coordinating Board and Southern Minnesota Advocates. Landkamer has also been a steadfast member of the "Highway 14 Partnership" -- a critical transportation initiative affecting several rural communities in Minnesota's First Congressional District.

Landkamer is very active in her state, where she chairs the Minnesota Counties Research Foundation, and serves on the Rural Policy Center Board of Directors, Greater Minnesota Housing Fund Board, Minnesota Transportation Alliance Board, and Minnesota Rural Partners Board. Landkamer represented Minnesota's elected officials as a member of Minnesota's Economic Summit-a core group of business leaders who advocate for "Building a Knowledge Economy for Minnesota's 21st Century." Previously, she was president of the Association of Minnesota Counties, co-chair of the Minnesota Health Improvement Program, and served on the Children, Families, and Learning Planning Committee, State Community Health Advisory Committee and the Delivery of Correctional Services State Committee.

Landkamer was recognized by **American City and County Magazine** as **2000 County Leader of the Year**, and most recently, received the Minnesota County Engineers *Citizen Service Award* and the Center for Transportation Studies *Distinguished Public Leadership Award*.

As a Humphrey Institute Fellow, Landkamer graduated from the Senior Executive Program in State and Local Government at Harvard University in June of 2001. Colleen and her husband Jack Landkamer reside in Mankato and have three sons, John, Michael, and Patrick.





**STATEMENT OF THE HONORABLE COLLEEN LANDKAMER  
COMMISSIONER, BLUE EARTH COUNTY, MINNESOTA**

**AND  
PRESIDENT OF THE  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**ON**

**THE ROLE OF RURAL AREAS AND LOCAL  
GOVERNMENTS IN A NEW NATIONAL  
TRANSPORTATION POLICY**

**BEFORE THE  
NATIONAL SURFACE TRANSPORTATION POLICY AND  
REVENUE STUDY COMMISSION**

**MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA**

**APRIL 19, 2007**

4/6/07 Testimony to be presented in Minneapolis, MN

Good morning. I am Colleen Landkamer, County Commissioner for Blue Earth County Minnesota and President of the National Association of Counties (NACo). I thank you for the opportunity to comment on the concerns of rural and small urban area counties related to the future federal transportation program.

NACo represents 3066 counties across the nation, of which over 2000 are rural. In the rural areas, local government owned routes are essential to the regional and national economy. These highways link communities in the regional economy and make the essential connections to the interstates and national highway system. Without these connections, raw materials don't get to regional centers and the final products don't get back to the consumers.

In Minnesota, we need to look to the future needs of our rural transportation system. The development of wind farms and of ethanol plants have recently become major issues to the rural economies. Our transportation system needs to support these developing environmentally sound businesses as well as our existing businesses.

In rural regions, we need a vision to develop and maintain our transportation infrastructure. This needs to be a joint undertaking between counties, other local governments, and the State DOT and must be supported by a true and equal partnership. Of course, we need the financial support of the federal government to translate the vision into reality. We hope that your recommendations continue to include a strengthening of the consultation and cooperative requirements that are currently

included in the planning sections of the federal surface transportation law.

To that end, local government can not provide all of these connections without more federal transportation funds being available to them to do so. Unlike the federal and state governments that rely on user fees for highway funding, local governments rely primarily on property taxes or "own source revenue" to finance their highway systems. Raising property taxes is often unpopular politically and from the perspective of many of our citizens there is little connection between better roads and increasing taxes. For that reason, we need to raise the federal user fees as a supplement to what we can raise at the local level. We need to work with all the partners to flexibly target the funds where they are needed most. This may be on an interstate, a state highway or a county highway. Do not leave rural local government out of the funding and decision making process or the economy will suffer because we will not be able to raise property taxes high enough to meet the needs of all the users.

In my part of Minnesota the economy is very dependent on farming. As farms and the equipment they use have gotten larger the structural capacity of our current road system is strained. Each state and local government needs to be able to define and build routes to carry these heavy trucks using a portion of the federal funds sent to each state. There should be a focused plan to invest in particular routes that carry a large number of heavy commercial vehicles or could do so if designed and built correctly. The Association of Minnesota Counties has worked together with our state DOT Office of State Aid for Local Transportation to define a subset of our major County Roads to build toward a 10 ton system. We believe that an effort like that would be valuable in every state. As we look at the movement of

commercial traffic and freight; I am simply saying that the vision needs to consider structural capacity needs of rural regions as well as congestion concerns of metropolitan areas.

Other parts of Minnesota rely heavily on the tourism industry. This has been a national trend in rural economies where a shift has been occurring away from agriculture and natural resource industries to tourism. If this sector of our economy is to grow, our citizens must be ensured that it is safe. Our lakes and forests are very attractive to visitors both from within and outside of our state. They travel to these regions to relax, to fish and to hunt. To get there they are often driving on our rural two lane highways. These rural roads have the highest fatality rates. More people die each year on these rural two lanes than on any other type of road. While Minnesota is very proud of the work we have done to reduce fatalities much remains to be done. I believe that there continues to be a need for a strong federal focus on safety. As budgets get tighter many local agencies are finding that they do not have the funds to bring roads up to the higher standards that are often required to improve safety. Strong federal requirements which are supported by funding will ensure that safer roads are built.

We also need the federal support of safety research which helps us identify those low cost fixes that can make major safety improvements without total reconstruction. Guardrails, rumble strips, lighting and pavement markings can go a long way toward improving safety if installed strategically. Research helps us learn where to target those improvements to get the most value. The flexibility that the current bill has that allows us to partner with enforcement agencies, education efforts and emergency services should be maintained. We need all 4 Es to make a difference in the safety area.

I have been concerned by some of the comments that I have heard as I travel around the nation on NACo business. Some people have said they don't believe that there is need for a federal role in transportation now that the interstate system is complete. I would say on behalf of NACo that as our world becomes more closely tied through trade and economic development we need a stronger rather than a decreased federal role. As we think of freight movement and the issue of getting agricultural products to market quickly and inexpensively, we all need to consider the interrelatedness of our transportation system. In Blue Earth County we depend on the strength of North and South Dakota's systems to get our products to the west coast. The congestion in the Chicago area clearly affects Minnesota's businesses as our products move through the bottlenecks in that metropolitan area. We need to know that the federal program will ensure a certain uniformity in our highway system --- that a truck stopping in Minnesota to do business or simply passing through our state can count on a safe comfortable trip. And we need to know that they get the same service in Iowa or Missouri as they travel south.

Transportation research is one of the critical federal investments that must continue to ensure continued innovations in our transportation infrastructure and services. Individual states can not do it alone. It is an area that is very important to all the transportation partners in Minnesota and we invest a significant amount of our state gas tax in research and believe the payback far out weighs the cost. But much of the research can be leveraged with federal funds and other states DOT funds if we have the FHWA to help bring us together through pooled fund studies and organizations like the Transportation Research board.

The percent of federal transportation funds used for research is currently one of the lowest of all federal agencies.

Please support a strong federal presence in transportation research in the new bill - it pays for itself many times over.

I encourage you to continue and expand both the on and off system bridge programs. Allowing the flexibility for federal funds to be used on local bridges helps those agencies who don't have the ability to fund a large expensive bridge with strictly local dollars. Minnesota is blessed with lots of water and that translates into lots of bridge needs.

I support the high environmental standards you expect for these projects but would like to see some goals for reducing redundancy and streamlining processes included in the new policies. The Minnesota DOT's State Aid Division worked with our counties and cities to develop an online Project Memo Writer tool that we can use to write the environmental documentation required for simple federal transportation projects. It has been referred to as TurboTax for environmental documents. It would be great if best practices like these could be systematically collected and shared with other states. I am sure that other states have similar examples that would benefit us if we just knew about them.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide my comments. I am ready to respond to any questions which my testimony has raised.