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NTSB findings don't end political debate over bridge

Supporters and critics of the governor and MnDOT find support for views in the report.

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Even before the federal report about the Interstate 35W bridge collapse became official Friday, Gov. Tim Pawlenty had used it to rebut critics who had questioned his administration's actions and decisions before the tragedy.

Beyond explaining why the bridge fell, the final report has served another purpose in the eyes of Pawlenty supporters -- clearing the governor of responsibility for the factors that led to the collapse.

"I think, by and large, it should end the speculation," said Bob McFarlin, former acting transportation commissioner who also found himself under political fire during the past year.

But critics ranging from legislators to union officials argue that Pawlenty and others ignored the investigation's other findings -- that at the time of the collapse the bridge was loaded with construction materials and equipment in a project supervised by the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

"I think it's more than the gusset plates," said Bob Hilliker, a former liaison to MnDOT for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. Hilliker said he was particularly struck by the National Transportation Safety Board's emphasis on the bridge's added construction weight, adding "Somebody had to look at [it, and say], 'Does the bridge have the capacity to add this weight?'"

Adding to the evidence that appeared to vindicate the governor was the release on Thursday of a report by Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, a consulting firm hired at Pawlenty's urging, that largely echoed the NTSB's findings. Originally described by Pawlenty's office as one of "two pairs of eyes," Wiss Janney soon began working hand in hand with NTSB investigators and reached the same conclusion, blaming the undersized gusset plates.

"That original design flaw was unrelated to subsequent inspections or maintenance of the bridge," the governor said Thursday. "Unfortunately, during the NTSB's investigation some individuals leapt to premature conclusions or attempted to use the bridge tragedy for political purposes."

Pawlenty issued his statement from Florida, where he was a keynote speaker at a postelection gathering of GOP leaders. The governor has defended his administration's actions before and after the collapse.

Meanwhile, Pawlenty's political profile has risen. He is seen as a possible presidential candidate in 2012, and was on a short list of candidates this summer to be John McCain's running mate.

"It appears hard to blame the governor for what happened," said Larry Jacobs, director of the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota. "It should lift some of the suspicion, among Democrats and others, that the governor's budget was responsible" because it did not devote enough money to transportation.

One frequent critic of the NTSB's previous statements on the collapse, U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, a Democrat and chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, this week praised the agency for conducting a scientific, unbiased study.

But state Sen. Jim Carlson, DFL-Eagan, vice chair of the Senate Transportation Committee and a retired mechanical engineer, said the NTSB's findings had done little to change his mind about the meaning of the collapse.

"We're not maintaining our infrastructure," he said, adding that there also "wasn't the seriousness in figuring out the loading on the bridge."

While Carlson said Pawlenty "didn't cause it to go down," the evidence shows that "very few did something to keep it up." The governor, he added, "really ought to be lowering his head and saying, 'I'm sorry.'"

Barry LePatner, a New York attorney who has written on the construction industry, said that the NTSB's findings also reflected poorly on MnDOT, an agency that he said prior to the collapse had garnered awards and been seen as a "very well-run department."

Jeremy Hanson, a spokesman for Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak, a DFLer whose name is being mentioned as a possible gubernatorial candidate in 2010, said the report confirmed that the bridge fell for a variety of reasons, including "a failure of design, a failure of inspections, and a failure of repair."

McFarlin, however, said the report's findings were more clear. "Maintenance shortcomings didn't contribute to the collapse. Those are just matters of fact."

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