

# The Road Ahead

## Talking with Rep. Jim Oberstar, Chairman of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

BY MINDY LONG

EDITORS NOTE: From setting regulations for truckers to allocating funds for the nation's highways, the federal government has a profound impact on drivers' lives. Trucking Matters will regularly offer interviews with key players affecting the transportation industry.

WHEN IT COMES TO transportation, Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) is one of the most powerful leaders on Capitol Hill. He serves as chairman of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, which has jurisdiction over America's surface transportation, freight and passenger rail and the inland waterway system. He shared his insights and predictions for the year ahead with *Road King*.

**Q** Congress is preparing for the next highway funding bill, which authorizes federal surface transportation programs for highways, highway safety and transit. What will be your top priorities as you draft new legislation?

**A** I believe that the surface transportation authorization legislation we will take up in the 111th Congress will represent a transformational moment in our surface transportation history, and it will provide us the opportunity to address the challenges and needs of the 21st century. The nation's infrastructure powers our economy and affects our quality of life. With a strong focus on reducing congestion and eliminating freight choke-points, we can improve our transportation system for professional truckers, as well as all users.

**Q** The highway trust fund, which pays for transportation projects and is funded through fuel taxes, is nearly broke. Many have suggested the use of

tolls and public-private partnerships, whereby states sell roads to private firms that enact tolls. What are you doing to ensure the integrity of a national highway system?

**A** The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure has held a number of hearings on these topics. Public-private partnerships and tolling do have a role to play in our surface transportation program; however, they must be properly employed in order to protect the public interest. They also cannot supplant the federal role.

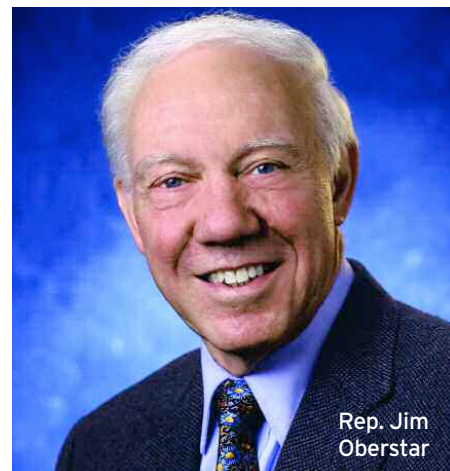
While private companies are responsible for the profits of their shareholders, the federal government will always have a strong interest in creating and maintaining a transportation system that serves the interests of the traveling public.

**Q** Year after year there are attempts to commercialize rest areas, which would overturn or modify federal law so states could sell food and fuel at rest areas. What are your thoughts on rest area commercialization?

**A** I have long been opposed to attempts to commercialize rest areas. After numerous attempts, the Committee was successful in enacting the SAFETEA-LU Technical Corrections Act of 2008. This legislation included the repeal of a provision that many were concerned would lead to full commercialization of rest areas.

We must protect that Interstate right-of-way from commercialization efforts, and I will continue to oppose these efforts as we craft the next surface transportation legislation.

**Q** The devastating collapse of the I-35 W bridge in Minnesota in 2007 brought attention to the nation's infra-



Rep. Jim Oberstar

Rep. Jim Oberstar (D) began representing Minnesota's Eighth Congressional District in Congress in 1975. Now serving his 18th term, he is the longest serving member of Congress from Minnesota. In addition to chairing the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, he is an Ex Officio member of the Subcommittees on Aviation; Coast Guard & Maritime Transportation; Economic Development, Public Works & Emergency Management; Highway & Transit; Railroads, Pipelines & Hazardous Materials; and Water Resources & Environment. He lives in Chisholm, Minn.

structure needs. What has happened since?

**A** The collapse of the I-35W Bridge was a tragic reminder of the importance of our infrastructure. After supplying emergency funding to replace the bridge, I introduced the National Highway Bridge Reconstruction and Inspection Act, which provides funds for states to repair bridges and to improve their inspection process.

The legislation passed the House by a vote of 367-55. The bill is still awaiting Senate action. We must restore the public's faith in the safety of the nation's infrastructure, and strengthening our bridge program will be a priority in the next surface transportation legislation.

*This is a first in a series of interviews with federal officials focusing on issues affecting the trucking industry. If you have questions for future articles, please send them to [editor@roadking.com](mailto:editor@roadking.com).*