Briefing on Bridge Infrastructure

February 20, 2019

TFIC began its regular meetings with lawmakers last Wednesday in Springfield, part of our ongoing efforts to educate about the challenges facing our infrastructure and build support for a capital bill this spring.

We started with a topic fresh on the minds of many in Illinois: bridge safety. With a scare on the Lake Shore Drive bridge that forced its closure in Chicago, and another major thoroughfare nearly closed over I-80 in Joliet, many are questioning how safe our bridges really are.

Our former IDOT expert, now working at a TFIC member company, assured those in attendance bridges are safe in Illinois. IDOT and local governments constantly coordinate to identify problems and address them as soon as possible, even if that means posting them for lower weight limits, closing them or shifting money that should go to other transportation projects to shore them up. With more than 26,000 bridges in the state and local systems, time is taking its toll on our bridges: 45 percent of Illinois’ bridges are at least 55 years old, 9 percent are structurally deficient and about 3 percent are weight-posted.

The I-80 bridges over the Des Plaines River in Joliet are facing a crisis, with a rating of 6 and 7 out of 100. Engineers are watching them closely and have taken short-term measures to prevent failure, but they need major funding help now.

What do we do next? Lawmakers in attendance raised a number of good points and questions. Should Illinois look at expanding tollways to shore up bridges and high-traffic roadways? Would homeland security funding for pathways in and out of especially critical areas be available? How do other states address their aging bridges? And could we help address this problem through a new federal capital bill? TFIC experts stressed that Illinois needs billions of dollars more just to ensure we keep receiving the federal funding we receive today, which now accounts for a staggering 90 percent of our state road program. Illinois needs to invest in its transportation system now, and our aging bridges are showing us why we cannot wait.