

Bridge to the GOP

Will Minneapolis be ready for the Republican convention?

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At 5:30 p.m. last August 1, Lois Anderson drove across the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis, a route she took four times a day to and from her job as a customer account specialist. A half an hour later, the span collapsed into the Mississippi River, killing 13 people and injuring 145. Today, almost a year after the tragedy, she remains grateful for her survival, but is still dealing with the logistical fallout: taking alternative routes has doubled and sometimes even tripled her commute time. With the bridge still out and 45,000 visitors expected to converge on the Twin Cities Sept. 1-4 for the Republican National Convention, Anderson, 63, is dreading her drive even more. "Traffic will be horrible," she says. "I don't want to think about it."

But planners and transportation experts in Minnesota say she has little to worry about. Since I-35W was not a primary artery between Minneapolis--where large blocs of hotel rooms have been booked--and St. Paul, where the convention is taking place--the bridge would not have played much of a role in traffic flow. What's more, the biggest events at the convention hall, the XCel Energy Center, are scheduled for prime-time TV viewing, long after the rush-hour rat race has run its course. "We've known so far in advance that we had to plan for this," said convention spokesman Matt Burns. "We can adjust and get people where they need to go."

Delegates and other convention-goers are expected to forgo cars for the most part and instead commute from their hotels to the hall on 300 to 350 shuttle buses provided by the Republican National Committee, said John Maczko, St. Paul city engineer and transportation coordinator for the convention. They may even decide to jump on one of 1,000 free bicycles provided by the Humana health care company and Bikes Belong, a cycling advocacy group. (In a decidedly non-partisan gesture--and a canny marketing move--Humana and Bikes Belong will also provide the Democrats with free two-wheel transportation at their convention in Denver in August).

Easygoing Minnesotans seem calm at the prospect of an influx of Republicans arriving the week of Labor Day. "Forty-five thousand people isn't a special issue. We have more than that here any day for a Minnesota Twins baseball game," said Capt. Tom Fraser of the Minnesota State Patrol. But that doesn't mean it will be business as usual for every commuter. "There will be inconveniences," acknowledges Maczko. "It may take more time or (require) taking a different route than usual."

City-dwellers say they are preparing for the worst but hoping for the best. "People are talking about the convention and they're concerned," says Jenna Strain, 23, a third-grade teacher living in Minneapolis. But she has faith the complications will be worked out. "We've been able to find solutions and solve a problem here," she said.

That resiliency was called into action after the I-35W bridge collapsed 10 months ago. The six-lane, steel bridge, which opened in 1967, carried more than 140,000 vehicles a day. An ongoing investigation by the National Transportation Safety Board found that a number of the bridge's steel gussets--plates that connect steel girders--were too thin (because of a design flaw) and that extra weight on the bridge from construction vehicles and materials being used at the time for resurfacing may have led to the collapse. A final report is not due until the end of the year.

After the collapse, commuters adjusted quickly. Public transit use jumped 25 percent. One third of regular bridge-users seem to have disappeared, which traffic experts attribute to commuters cutting out non-essential trips and telecommuting, said John Hourdos, director of the Minnesota Traffic Observatory. Another one third of the former bridge brigade now use alternative routes. University of Minnesota official Megan Morrissey became creative about finding routes to the St. Paul campus. "Eventually, I found the most efficient route was to go around the back of the campus and through it," says the associate director of the School of Social Work.

Overall, average commuting times for freeway users have increased only by about five to ten minutes, according to Hourdos. In fact, drivers adjusted so swiftly to life without the span across the Mississippi River that a study is underway to determine why they could turn away so easily, said investigator David Levinson, an engineering professor at the University of Minnesota.

By Christmas Eve, the wraps are to come off the new \$234 million St. Anthony Falls bridge (optimistic officials say it could open even earlier). The new span will have 10 lanes, up from 6 on the old bridge, and it can be expanded to 14 lanes if necessary, according to Peter Sanderson, project manager for Flatiron-Manson, the Colorado-based contractor rebuilding the bridge. As added incentive to get it done, the company earns \$200,000 for every day it finishes ahead of the contracted completion date. Still, officials say it is highly unlikely they'll have it completed in time for the convention.

Some 700 workers are laboring around the clock on the new bridge. By July, the 120 precast concrete segments that make up the bridge's skeleton will traverse the river. They'll connect up to concrete side spans located over land. Then comes the railings, lighting and striping, which should take another six to eight weeks, Sanderson said.

The new bridge can't come soon enough for Anderson, who would like to resume her old driving route, which was so speedy she could make it home for lunch every day and still have time to take a short walk and to do a little gardening. "It's nice to get away from the office. It's relaxing," she said. "It will be very nice to have it again."

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