



NORTH CAROLINA GENERAL ASSEMBLY  
PRESIDENT PRO TEMPORE  
SENATOR MARC BASNIGHT  
RALEIGH 27601-2808

February 24, 2010

Honorable Barack Obama  
President of the United States  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

I write to you today to bring to your attention a shocking matter of safety and security that has been stymied for so many years that the only person who can resolve it is you.

The Herbert C. Bonner Bridge over Oregon Inlet in North Carolina is the only bridge that connects Americans to one of the nation's most beautiful and visited national parks, the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. For the people of the Outer Banks, it is the only lifeline to their personal and economic survival. More than 5,000 people cross this bridge daily – twice that amount of traffic in the summer tourist season. Yet for over 20 years now, the bridge has continued to deteriorate and its replacement is long overdue.

Imagine for a moment a busload of school children traveling across the bridge. When the bus reaches the apex of the bridge's 3.3-mile span, the road collapses, sending the bus and all of the children into the water below. While this image is horrific, it is indeed possible. Thankfully, it is also avoidable – if the federal government acts now to remove all further obstacles and delays, so that construction may finally begin.

Instead, we continue to face unnecessary delays from a government that is more worried about the litigious threats of out-of-state environmental groups than about the public safety and economic well-being of the millions of motorists who cross the bridge every year. I plead with you to right this wrong that has wasted millions of dollars and infinite red tape over the years – at the hands of federal bureaucrats and at the risk of the safety of millions of people.

Two years ago, when the Interstate 35W bridge collapsed in Minneapolis and killed over a dozen people, many local residents wondered whether the same fate could occur here. The Bonner Bridge's safety rating is 2 out of 100 – almost 50 points lower than the I-35W bridge had been rated. The bridge has fallen into the water already – as far back as 1983, Bonner Bridge was closed for damage repair when a span began to sag and had to be reinforced. In 1990,

hurricane-force winds blew a dredge barge into the bridge, knocking out a center section of the span. Thankfully, no one was injured – but thousands of permanent residents of Hatteras were cut off from the mainland for four months except by air and ferry. During storms and nor'easters, high winds and visibility problems make crossing the bridge even more precipitous.

While safety is always our greatest concern, we must also consider the financial costs of delay. The Bonner Bridge replacement has been studied and reviewed for decades – at an ever-increasing cost to taxpayers. If we had built this bridge 10 years ago it would have cost a fraction of the price. Up until 2005, the N.C. Department of Transportation spent more than \$30 million on studies and plans alone. Today, we have a bridge replacement plan that your own Environmental Protection Agency has proposed and that the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers supports – yet federal highway attorneys have slowed down the process yet again. One recent document endured 11 separate legal reviews in just two months! I would argue that the Bonner replacement project is the most studied bridge in the history of our country. It is far past time to take action. The Congress and federal officials have created such a complex and repetitive maze of bureaucracy that replacing a dilapidated bridge has been studied and discussed for more than 20 years – and the new bridge is still nowhere in sight.

At stake in this battle is not only the economic future of generations of families, but also the rich cultural heritage that has been at the center of Americana since John White's arrival in the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. These coastal families, almost all of whom come from modest backgrounds such as yours and mine, have been under assault for almost a decade by these out-of-state and out-of-touch environmental groups whose ultimate goal is to remove all human activities from Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands. The closure of many of our beaches on Cape Hatteras National Seashore devastated the local economy and put many families reeling from an already troubled economic climate into a tailspin. The imminent deterioration of the only permanent connection to the mainland has only helped in riveting up the fears and anxieties of both resident and visitor alike. Immediate action is woefully overdue. We have the opportunity now, after all this lost time and money, to have a new beginning.

I am pleased to let you know that the State of North Carolina already has funding set aside in the Transportation Improvement Program for the bridge replacement. Mr. President, only you and your Administration can shake loose this bureaucratic standstill. I would urge you to ask Interior Secretary Ken Salazar and Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and their respective agencies to accept the design cleared by the EPA and the Army Corps of Engineers and allow construction to begin as soon as possible.

Mr. President, I have had the privilege to meet you on several occasions and was especially touched by your immediate knowledge of the Lost Colony and the Outer Banks' role in our nation's history. I know you to be an honorable and decent man who is busier than any of us can imagine, but I ask you respectfully and forcefully to resolve this situation once and for all and clear the way for a replacement bridge immediately.

Yours truly,



Marc Basnight