March 7, 2011

The Honorable Timothy F. Geithner
Secretary of the Treasury
United States Department of the Treasury
Room 3300
1500 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20220

Dear Mr. Secretary:

On behalf of the Congressional Oversight Panel, I am writing to express concern about Treasury’s handling of the recent redesign of its main website, Treasury.Gov, as well as its website for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), FinancialStability.Gov. In particular, I am troubled that the redesign has relocated thousands of documents critical to oversight, rendering it difficult – and in some cases even impossible – for oversight bodies, outside experts, or the public to review Treasury’s work.

As you are aware, in our monthly oversight reports on the TARP, the Panel relies heavily on official materials published by Treasury. Our reports commonly cite dozens of documents on Treasury’s website, including TARP program guidelines, transaction reports, and press releases. In keeping with common government practice, the Panel cites these documents using their Uniform Resource Locators (URLs) on Treasury’s website. We intend for these citations to provide outside and future experts with the information needed to verify or expand upon the Panel’s work. The continued availability of cited documents represents a meaningful part of the Panel’s legacy and an important resource to future policymakers.

Unfortunately, Treasury’s redesign of its website has broken nearly a thousand hyperlinks from the Panel’s past oversight reports – as well as countless hyperlinks from other oversight bodies, newspaper websites, and other Internet users. Visitors attempting to follow a hyperlink from a past Panel report in order to view, for example, a TARP contract that disbursed billions of taxpayer dollars, or a summary of Treasury’s disbursements under TARP to date, will no longer find this critical information. Instead, visitors are redirected to the front page of Treasury’s website, which contains no explanation of the redesign and no guidance on how users can proceed to find their requested document. Regrettably, Treasury provided no advance notice to the Panel of its website redesign or the implications for the TARP’s transparency.

It is important to note that the accessibility problems posed by a website redesign are well-recognized within the federal government, and the Office of Management and Budget has proposed “best practices” to ensure that redesigns do not improperly obscure
public information. In particular, the Interagency Committee on Government Information issued a 2004 report entitled “Recommended Policies and Guidelines for Federal Public Websites,” which states:

[E]very visitor needs to know about changes to URLs that may affect bookmarks and other links to the website. Since many federal organizations link to each other, it's important to keep URLs current, or provide redirect pages, so content on other federal websites also stays current. For individual page URL changes, organizations should insert a “redirect” notice that will automatically take visitors to the new URL. When a significant number of page URLs change at one time (for example, as part of a redesign or conversion to an automated content management system), organizations should provide as many ways as possible for visitors to locate the new page locations.

The Panel is troubled that Treasury does not appear to have followed these “best practices” in its recent redesign. Although a small handful of outdated URLs on the Treasury website include a redirect code that points users directly to their requested page, the vast majority of URLs do not; they direct users only to Treasury’s front page.

To Treasury’s credit, your staff has been accessible and helpful to the Panel when we have requested updated URLs for now-outdated hyperlinks. Unfortunately, our staff conversations have revealed that, in many cases, Treasury itself has no readily available record of where old files have been relocated on the new website. Of even greater concern is the fact that Treasury appears to have removed certain documents from its website entirely during the redesign. For example, when the Panel recently requested the updated URL for a TARP contract with GMAC, Treasury responded that “this was an old file that was removed from the [Financial Stability] website” during the redesign. Although Treasury has offered to provide the Panel with copies of all removed or revised documents for our archival purposes, it is concerning that these documents are not otherwise available to the public.

The Panel urges Treasury to consider updating your website to redirect users who attempt to visit outdated URLs to the same information at its new location. If Treasury determines that it is not technically feasible to provide a redirect notice for all outdated URLs, Treasury should provide visitors to those addresses with a clear explanation of the website’s redesign and specific, actionable instructions on how they may find their requested information. Further, the Panel urges Treasury to ensure that all public records that were available on its old website remain available on its new website.

The Panel appreciates that website redesigns are occasionally a necessary and important step in government outreach. Indeed, Treasury deserves credit for creating a new website that is, in general, more accessible and more readily navigable than earlier versions. Even so, Treasury’s steps toward the future must not shroud its past. The TARP provided Treasury the authority to spend a staggering $700 billion in taxpayer funds, and Americans deserve full and ready access to the information necessary to learn from the TARP’s experience and to judge the program’s legacy.
Sincerely,

Senator Ted Kaufman  
Chairman  
Congressional Oversight Panel

Cc: Mr. Vivek Kundra,  
U.S. Chief Information Officer,  
Office of Management & Budget

Mr. Damon Silvers  
Mr. J. Mark McWatters  
Mr. Richard Neiman  
Dr. Kenneth Troske
March 14, 2011

Senator Ted Kaufman, Chairman
Congressional Oversight Panel
732 North Capitol Street, NW
Room C-320
Washington, DC 20401

Dear Senator Kaufman:

I am writing in response to your letter of March 7 regarding the redesign of the Department of the Treasury’s websites, and in particular, the website for the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP), FinancialStability.gov.

Your letter notes that our website redesign project inadvertently broke numerous hyperlinks from the Congressional Oversight Panel’s (COP) past oversight reports. We regret the inconvenience to the Panel and to those that rely on its reports.

The redesign of the FinancialStability.gov website was part of a Treasury-wide website modernization project intended to make all Treasury websites more accessible, user-friendly and informative. The website was created to provide the public with information about TARP and ensure that we implement TARP programs in as transparent a manner as possible. Thus, we have posted thousands of documents on FinancialStability.gov, enabling the public to easily access information about the programs. FinancialStability.gov was not, however, created as a records management system and we add and remove content as appropriate. For example, to make the site as clear and useful as possible, we may remove legal documents that have been superseded by more recent contracts or agreements, or we may remove documents that are no longer relevant or applicable to TARP programs.

Nevertheless, we have worked hard to ensure that your staff has all of the new links and documents needed to complete the archiving of COP’s records. Soon after COP staff first expressed concerns about the new website, I made my staff available to explain our process for the website changes. To facilitate the identification of old and new hyperlinks, our technical experts sent a master spreadsheet that mapped the majority of these links from the old site to the new site. Thereafter, we worked with COP staff to provide them with each of the new links they requested, and, in the case of any removed documents, we provided PDFs to ensure all documents cited in COP’s reports were available. It is our understanding that at this point all problematic links have been addressed.

You point out that we could have uniformly utilized redirect notices as was recommended by the Interagency Committee on Government Information in a report issued in 2004. We have already implemented a number of changes to the site, including a new page explaining site changes, an
updated redirect notification, and expanded language on error pages explaining the redesign and offering ways for people to find the information they are looking for. We will be making additional adjustments in the near future.

We are always open to suggestions on how we can do a better job in using technology to keep the public informed, and we appreciate your input on this matter. Thank you again for your letter.

Sincerely,

Timothy G. Massad
Acting Assistant Secretary for Financial Stability

Cc:  Mr. Damon Silvers
     Mr. J. Mark McWatters
     Mr. Richard Neiman
     Dr. Kenneth Troske