

Testimony of the Transportation for America Coalition
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Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
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Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member DeFazio, and members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am John Robert Smith, President and CEO of Reconnecting America, a national nonprofit that is helping to transform promising ideas into thriving communities – where transportation choices make it easy to get from place to place, where businesses flourish, and where people from all walks of life can afford to live, work and visit. Reconnecting America is the managing partner of the Center for Transit-Oriented Development, a national nonprofit which promotes best practices in transit-oriented development.

Reconnecting America is also a founding partner and co-chair of the Transportation for America Coalition, the country's broadest and most diverse transportation coalition. Our members hail from the fields of transportation, housing, environment, public health, real estate, safety, and social equity, representing more than 500 different organizations.

On behalf of Transportation for America, I would like to thank the Subcommittee for holding this hearing on improving and reforming the nation's surface transportation programs. Functional, safe, and efficient transportation systems are one of the cornerstones upon which this country was built. Now, the future of America's economic growth, energy security, and the health of our citizens depend on our ability to affordably connect people with jobs, education, healthcare, and opportunity.

With the current extension of SAFETEA-LU set to expire on September 30, 2011, now is the time for the members of this Subcommittee to work with your colleagues throughout the Congress and in the Administration to set policies in place to deliver a 21st century transportation system that is smarter, safer, and cleaner – and provides real choices for all Americans. The upcoming reauthorization of the surface transportation programs presents an opportunity to develop a new vision for our national transportation system and leave behind a lasting legacy for our children and grandchildren.

To achieve these lofty goals, the next surface transportation bill must adhere to certain core principles, namely: 1) increasing efficiency and accountability to get a better bang for our buck; 2) providing transportation options for all Americans; and 3) addressing the needs of all communities, including small towns and rural America.

I. Increase efficiency and accountability to get a better bang for our buck

Our federal transportation program is at a crossroads today. We lack the funds needed to improve our transportation system. The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Commission estimated that as a nation we need to invest \$225 billion annually to repair and

upgrade our transportation system. Yet today the federal gas tax fails to provide enough revenues to support \$50 billion in annual expenditures.

Further there is widespread recognition that current federal policy is not providing taxpayers with the accountability and results that they deserve. We believe that regardless of the size of the next transportation authorization bill it is critical that we put in place the policies to spend our dollars more wisely.

The transportation planning process – which lays the foundation for the investment of billions of dollars – must be improved. As any successful business owners who create jobs can tell you, success starts with a good plan. Poor planning means wasted money and resources, and lost time and opportunity. In the transportation world, poor planning leads to major consequences – millions in taxpayer dollars lost and increasing traffic congestion as far as the eye can see.

Today, states and regions develop 20-year long range transportation plans to guide transportation investments and meet future development needs. Point-in-time predictions are made about how and where development will occur. However, the location and type of development change over time due to market demands, while transportation plans remain largely unchanged.

Current practice leads to the selection and construction of projects that do not provide states and regions with the “biggest bang for their buck” and results in plans that are not fiscally sound or tied to achievable goals - costing taxpayers millions. By developing transportation plans with demand predictions that often become outdated, elected officials and the public are constantly forced into a reactive decision-making mode – basing their decisions on information that does not adequately evaluate the benefits and consequences of different investment decisions – instead of proactively moving forward toward a shared regional vision.

Some communities across the country have found innovative ways to address this problem through strategic planning. For instance, Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission in the Philadelphia region started planning in 2007 to accommodate 6.15 million more people and 3.15 million more jobs by 2035. The diverse region includes a core city, developed communities, growing suburbs, and rural areas and demonstrates every type of transportation need. The region was facing a significant problem – rapid growth, significant transportation needs and limited revenues.

To meet this challenge, make the best use of limited funds and identify tradeoffs among competing goals, the region began a strategic planning process. The region compared three different scenarios – a “Trend” business-as-usual scenario, and two other divergent scenarios – “Recentralization” and “Sprawl.”

By comparing three scenarios, the region was able to provide several options to the communities affected by the plan and show how each would impact taxes, infrastructure investments, congestion and household costs. These scenarios helped decision-makers and the public understand how future policies and decisions could reduce direct household transportation costs by \$1,290 while also reducing driver delays by 28% and saving regional businesses and families \$1.4 billion annually.

The regional long-range plan, *Connections*, incorporates many aspects of the “Recentralization” scenario, offering a superior quality of life compared to other scenarios by increasing mobility choices, preserving more open space, lowering business and household expenditures and helping the region remain economically competitive.

We believe this type of planning can help accelerate project delivery by building consensus for a suite of projects up front, allowing transportation officials to move forward with public support. In addition, projects that are part of a program that shows progress towards regional goals could be given expedited review – a ‘green light’ of sorts - to help advance projects that show performance.

With the potential for significant benefits, strategic planning should not be done only on an ad hoc basis. The private sector in the greater Nashville region in middle Tennessee partnered with the public sector to do this type of planning when reports in the early 2000s said the region was on a course to become the ‘next Atlanta’ – a future they did not want. In a fiscally constrained world we should not wait until a region is on a road to a future they do not want to find ways to do more with less.

Many of the problems faced by these regions are similar to the ones we face as a nation – limited resources, rapid growth and staggering transportation needs. In this environment we must ask our transportation agencies to undertake the same due diligence as the private sector before they invest our tax dollars. We recommend that Congress look at the example these regions have set as a guide for reform of the transportation planning process.

Our transportation program is not just building new roads and transit systems – it is also repairing and rehabilitating our existing infrastructure. Over 50 years ago this nation undertook the largest public works initiative in history with the construction of the Interstate highway system.

This system has served as the backbone of our economic growth and competitiveness, helping to improve quality of life and prosperity. However, our nation’s highway system is in need of significant repair. This need is recognized by our state departments of transportation; the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), in their *Rough Roads Ahead* report, noted “years of wear and tear, unrelenting traffic, an explosion of heavy trucks, deferred maintenance, harsh weather conditions, and soaring construction costs have taken their toll on America’s roads.”

Despite billions of dollars in annual federal, state and local funds directed toward the maintenance of existing bridges, 69,223 bridges – representing more than 11 percent of total highway bridges in the U.S. – are classified as “structurally deficient,” according to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) – requiring significant maintenance, rehabilitation or replacement.¹ A number of bridges also exceed their expected lifespan of 50 years. The average age of an American bridge is 42 years.

¹ The Fix We’re In For: The State of our Nation’s Bridges, Transportation for America, 2011.

Only half of our major highways are in good condition. The problem is worse in urban areas where one in four roads is in poor condition. The poor condition of our nation's highway network costs drivers on average \$335 a year – or more than \$2,000 over the span of a typical federal transportation authorization.²

The maintenance backlog will only worsen as highways and bridges age and costs rise. According to FHWA's 2009 statistics, \$70.9 billion is needed to address the current backlog of deficient bridges.³ This figure will likely increase as many of our most heavily traveled bridges – including those built more than 40 years ago as part of the Interstate System – near the end of their expected lifespan.

The good news is that some states have worked hard to address the problem and have shrunk the backlog of deficient bridges. The bad news is that, critical as these efforts are, they are not nearly enough. Two key problems persist: First, while Congress has repeatedly declared bridge safety a national priority, existing federal programs offer no real incentives or assurances that aging bridges will actually get fixed. Second, the current level of investment is nowhere near what is needed to keep up with our rapidly growing backlog of aging bridges.

Again, there have been states that have found ways to address this problem. By prioritizing repair and maintenance of their existing structures and setting repair performance standards, Florida's Department of Transportation (FDOT) is providing some of the safest and highest-rated highways and bridges in the country. Florida has the second lowest percentage of poorly rated bridges of any state in the U.S: only 290 out of 11,899 total bridges, or 2.4 percent, are classified as structurally deficient.⁴

How has Florida managed this? Preserving existing infrastructure is one of three core principles of the FDOT. The agency defines "preservation" as ensuring that 80 percent of the pavement on the State Highway System meets department standards and that 90 percent of department-maintained bridges meet department standards.

In order to meet these targets, maintenance, repair and replacement projects receive funds before all other projects. The state uses data and analytical tools to determine the amount of funding needed to meet the department repair standards.

Florida's practices of prioritizing repair and maintenance, tracking repair needs, and setting measurable goals provide a template for success.

Taking care of our existing infrastructure is not only prudent but also saves money. In generic terms, if we assume that maintaining a road in good condition will cost approximately \$6 over a sixteen-year period, letting it fall into poor condition and then repairing it will cost \$16. For a department of transportation with a budget of \$30 over this same time period, this is the difference between having \$24 to expand the network and \$14.

² Rough Roads Ahead, American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, 2009.

³ SAFETEA-LU Funding Tables, FY2009, Table 3, Part 1, "Weighted Needs", p.27, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/safetealu/fy09comptables.pdf>

⁴ The Fix We're In For: The State of our Nation's Bridges, Transportation for America, 2011.

Congress should ensure that funds in repair programs are used for repair unless a state's bridges and highways are in a state of good repair. Current law allows states to take funds budgeted for roof repair and use them to add an addition to their houses – we cannot afford to continue this practice.

II. Provide Transportation Options for All Americans

In addition to repairing our nation's infrastructure, we need to focus the federal program on transportation options that provide choices for people in this era of rising gas prices. When people have transportation choices, whether they are in a big city, booming suburb or small town, they are empowered to make decisions without being hindered by distance and gas prices. Many aging baby boomers and veterans depend on public transit to see the doctor or go to the grocery store. Working parents need to get to their jobs, get their children from daycare and complete their errands in a timely manner. And college students need access to local higher education institutions and their part-time jobs as well. However, about half of all families in America do not have access to public transportation, leaving them with no option but to drive to their daily destinations, rely on increasingly stretched family members or friends, or not to leave home at all.

Safe, reliable, public transportation is an integral part of the nation's surface transportation network. According to the Texas Transportation Institute's 2010 Urban Mobility Report, without public transportation service, the nation's drivers would have suffered an additional 785 million hours of delay and consumed an additional 640 million gallons of fuel. Absent public transportation in the 439 areas studied, congestion costs for 2009 would have increased by nearly \$19 billion.

Public transportation is also an essential ingredient for continued economic growth. The American Public Transportation Association estimates that 36,000 jobs are created or supported for every \$1 billion in public transportation investment, and every \$1 invested in public transportation generates almost \$4 in economic benefits. Reconnecting America's work on transit-oriented development (TOD) has shown that TOD can leverage federal transit dollars into significant private-sector investment near transit, creating lasting value for communities, including improved housing affordability and choice, revitalized downtowns and neighborhood centers, and increased access to economic and social opportunity.

These benefits can have a transformational effect in communities. I saw this firsthand in Meridian, MS. A public-private investment turned our historic train station into the South's first multimodal transportation center and proved to be a catalyst for transforming our main street, increasing public transportation ridership, and helping to generate millions of dollars in private economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods. Historic buildings were renovated, people came back downtown to both live and work, and also for entertainment. Our city center was revived, not only for residents but for those that lived in the surrounding 11-county region. The city's investment of \$1 million leveraged an additional \$5 million in state and federal funding, which resulted in \$135 million in economic development.

Demand for transit is up and likely to continue rising, particularly if gas prices go higher. According to a recent study by the American Public Transportation Association, during the 2007 and 2008 gas price spike, 85 percent of transit agencies reported experiencing capacity constraints on parts of their systems. Over one-half of systems operated service crowded beyond their local service standards. Thirty-nine percent reported that overcrowded conditions were such that they were turning away passengers.⁵ The report predicts that gas prices of \$4 or higher will lead to similar conditions in the future.

At the same time, transit vehicles, tracks, and facilities are aging. Transit infrastructure received a near-failing grade of D in the ASCE 2009 Infrastructure Report Card. Capital investment in transit is well short of the \$60 billion in annual capital investment needs identified in the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' Bottom Line Report. Aging transit infrastructure leads to service and safety issues, which high ridership demand exacerbates.

As if skyrocketing demand and aging systems were not enough, local resources to run transit service are also dwindling. Since the beginning of 2009, approximately 85% of public transit systems have raised fares or cut service. Fifty-six percent of transit systems have cut rush hour service, and 62% have cut non-rush service. Forty percent of transit systems are now serving a smaller geographic area, leaving many people without a way to get to work, school, or the doctor.⁶

And finally we must not forget that investments in walking and bicycling infrastructure are some of the most cost-effective transportation investments we can make. Americans are increasingly searching for personal solutions to tight family budgets, rising health costs and time wasted in traffic. As a society, we are facing monumental challenges relating to pollution and oil dependence. Despite a small current investment of resources, bicycling and walking already account for 10 percent of all trips made by Americans, and the potential clearly exists to double that share. Forty percent of all trips in the United States are just two miles or less. These are by far the easiest to shift to bicycling and walking.

A modest investment in the next transportation bill in bicycling and walking will enable our nation to move decisively towards a goal of increasing the share of trips taken by these modes from 10 percent to 20 percent. Such a shift to bicycling and walking will provide tens of billions of dollars per year in economic, health, tourism, energy, environmental, safety, and congestion-relief benefits.

Transportation for America offers several key recommendations to ensure that the federal program supports the provision of transportation options. First, we strongly urge the Subcommittee to ensure that the next surface transportation authorization provides annual

⁵ Potential Impact of Gasoline Price Increases on U.S. Public Transportation Ridership, 2011 -2012, American Public Transportation Association, March 2011.

⁶ Stranded Voices, Amalgamated Transit Union, March 2011.

dedicated funding for transit to significantly address the needs described above. Second, the restriction on many transit agencies' ability to use federal funds to support operations should be removed; the federal program should not continue this limitation on transit agencies' choices about how to invest in their systems.

Third, we encourage the Subcommittee to use this opportunity to level the playing field between new transit and highway projects in terms of timeline, process, and federal match. Currently, it takes an average of 13 years for a new transit project to move through the federal New Starts process (which provides, on average, 50% of the cost of such projects), and only 10 years for a major new highway (which, in general, receives 80% of its cost from the federal program).

Fourth, transit projects must be able to fairly participate in any new or expanded financing programs that the Subcommittee includes in the next bill. This will be particularly important as Congress looks for ways to leverage non-federal investment in the transportation system. In addition, Congress should support communities' efforts to use transit assets as economic development drivers by providing targeted assistance and financing support for equitable TOD.

Fifth, we recommend that all federally-funded road projects provide safe accommodations for all users of the facility, whether driving, walking, taking public transportation or in a wheelchair or stroller. And sixth, we strongly recommend that existing federal funding for ensuring the development of safe walking and bicycling facilities be continued in the next authorization. These programs are a small fraction of overall spending in the authorization bill, yet allow for local development of low-cost travel options.

To conclude, let me reiterate that investment in a wide range of transportation options is important for small towns and rural areas, suburban communities, and big cities. People have the same transportation needs no matter where they live, and should be afforded the same transportation options. Investing in transportation options will lead to a better quality of life for all Americans and increased economic development to benefit all our citizens.

III. Address the needs of all communities, including small towns and rural areas

Before I came to Washington almost two years ago, I was a 16-year Republican mayor in my hometown of Meridian, Mississippi. Meridian is a small city of 40,000 that serves as a regional draw for 11 counties. As Mayor, I witnessed firsthand the transportation challenges facing those who live in small towns and rural areas. The unique transportation needs of these areas are clear: longer distances between job opportunities, volatile energy prices, and shifting demographics are all impacting their continued prosperity. Regional, intermodal transportation connections are critical. While there are similar challenges facing metropolitan areas, many small towns and rural areas lack the financial resources, planning capacity, or the authority to implement local priorities that may not always align with those at the state level. A bold new policy is needed at the federal level with significant input from the state and local levels to reform investments in the transportation system. This should be done in a way that will benefit the residents of rural and small town areas by ensuring adequate investment to maintain existing infrastructure, facilitate economic growth, and provide affordable mobility options.

Recognizing the need for discussion and consensus around these issues, Transportation for America brought together during 2009, transportation practitioners, nonprofit advocates, service providers, and elected officials to identify barriers to accessibility in non-metropolitan areas and develop solutions for these challenges. Those discussions led to the following key principles for improving transportation options in rural and small town communities.

1. *Improve the role of rural communities in the transportation planning process.* Many rural communities today feel that they have little voice in the statewide transportation planning process that drives the expenditure of federal transportation funds. In addition, in instances where they do have “a seat at the table” they often lack the technical expertise or staff to help advocate for the needs of their communities.

We recommend that regional transportation organizations be established in federal law to help provide rural communities with an informed voice and “a seat at the table” in the statewide transportation planning process. These organizations can also work to help ensure better coordination between transportation, economic development and housing plans to better leverage public and private sector investments.

2. *Promote and revitalize rural town centers.* Many rural communities are experiencing declining economic conditions and loss of jobs and population. Restoring transportation infrastructure can help leverage private sector investment and economic development in existing communities. We recommend creating a competitive grant to help restore transportation infrastructure in rural town centers. This program would be administered by states and could be funded through additional revenues or from a set-aside of existing programs.

3. *Improve the efficiency and coordination of rural transit service.* Transit service a key lifeline to many rural residents – providing access to health care, jobs, and education. In rural areas there are often many public and private transit operators providing service; however this service is often uncoordinated, making it difficult to efficiently meet travel needs. In other instances service is duplicative and inefficient due to federal rules.

We recommend that the coordinated human services plan from SAFETEA-LU be strengthened and enhanced to result in meaningful coordination of transit service in rural and small urban areas. To reduce duplicative and inefficient transit service, specialized transit operators (sections 5310, 5316 and 5317 of Title 49, United States Code) would be given flexibility to serve elderly individuals, persons with disabilities, and low-income individuals at their discretion. In addition, funding would be provided at the state level for innovative improvements to further enhance coordination.

4. *Reduce transportation costs and provide rural residents with travel options.* Rural communities have unique transportation needs. Too often Washington ‘pre-determines’ the best solution for rural communities through restrictive federal rules. Limiting travel options for rural communities not only impacts economic competitiveness and quality of life, it also increases transportation costs for residents.

We recommend that rural areas be provided with increased flexibility to invest in additional transportation improvements – rail, local street networks, intercity bus, access management – to meet the unique needs of rural communities. These changes will allow for outcome-based investment decisions and help make sure we get the ‘best the bang for our buck.’ In addition, in rural areas we should actively work to leverage private investment in travel options and allow private funds to serve as the local match for federal transit assistance.

5. *Improve safety in rural areas.* Rural roads have higher crash rates and fatalities than urban areas. Approximately 60% of all crashes and fatalities happen on rural roads while only 40% of travel occurs in rural areas and 20% of Americans live in rural areas. Despite these disproportionate impacts states have only obligated 44% of their high risk rural road funding.⁷

We recommend that the highway safety improvement program be revised to strike an appropriate balance between urban and rural needs– focusing not just on crash frequency but also on crash rates. The program should focus on low-cost improvements within the right-of-way, where possible, to stretch dollars.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me reiterate that Transportation for America supports a rejuvenated, redirected national transportation program that would result in a national mobility network providing a vital, complete array of mobility choices easily access ible to the vast majority of Americans – whether walking, bicycling, driving or traveling on public transportation– in a unified, interconnected, energy-efficient manner. Such a system will serve our national interests, add value to communities, contribute positively to public health and safety, and reflect the values of equity and fairness that have been hallmarks of our nation’s domestic policy.

As Congress considers the upcoming transportation authorization, Transportation for America stands ready to assist its efforts in developing a world-class, sustainable transportation system that will turn this nation back into a world leader on surface transportation policy. Again, thank you for inviting Transportation for America to testify before this Subcommittee.

⁷ Implementing the High Risk Rural Roads Program, Federal Highway Administration, March 2010.