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Senator Murray's Opening Remarks Hearing on FY 2011 Budget Request for the Federal Railroad Administration and the National Passenger Railroad Corporation

(Washington D.C.) – Today, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) delivered the following opening remarks at the Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies, which she chairs.

"The Subcommittee will come to order.

"This morning we will be holding a hearing on the President's budget request for the Federal Railroad Administration and the budget request of the National Passenger Railroad Corporation, or Amtrak.

"We will be hearing testimony from two panels this morning. The first panel will include the Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration, Mr. Joseph Szabo.

"The second panel will consist of three witnesses: Amtrak's President and CEO, Mr. Joe Boardman; Amtrak's Inspector General, Mr. Ted Alves; and the Deputy Inspector General for the Department of Transportation, Ms. Ann Calvaresi Barr.

"I would like to welcome all of our witnesses at this time. Thank you for being here this morning, and I look forward to hearing your testimony.

"Efficient rail transportation in America ties our communities together. It creates jobs, boosts the economy, reduces the price of good being shipped, and helps commuters across the country get to work.

"That's why I'm so glad this administration has expressed a level of interest in rail transportation that we haven't seen for a very long time. They understand the important role railroads play in our transportation system.

"This subcommittee has seen too many budget requests from previous administrations that would have guaranteed the bankruptcy of Amtrak, which would be devastating to commuters and communities across the country.

"I know families in my home state of Washington deeply value our Amtrak service—the Cascade Line has set a new record for ridership this year and I have personally heard from so many people who depend on it. And I know that communities around the country value their rail service as well.

- "That's why I'm so glad that, this year the Administration's request for grants to Amtrak would support the railroad, although it does not meet all of the needs identified by Amtrak itself. In addition, the Administration is again requesting \$1 billion for grants to support intercity and high speed rail.
- "This funding builds on the \$10.5 billion provided for these purposes through the fiscal year 2010 appropriations act and the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, including \$590 million to improve high speed rail in Washington state.
- "And finally, rail transportation is being included with roads and mass transit in discussions about the nation's larger network of surface transportation.
- "In the Recovery Act, we were able to provide States with the flexibility to invest their formula grants in freight and passenger rail. Rail transportation has also played an important part in the Department's TIGER grant program that I fought to include.But we still need to recognize that all of this work—as well as recent proposals for additional funding—is happening at a time when financial constraints are increasing, and likely to become even greater.
- "As families across the country look for ways to tighten our belts, leaders here in Washington, D.C. need to redouble our efforts to get federal spending under control and reduce our debt and deficit.
- "That's why the budget President Obama sent to Congress freezes domestic discretionary spending. And the budget resolution we recently passed in the Senate Budget Committee goes a step further by reducing this spending by an additional \$4 billion.
- "We owe it to future generations to not burden them with debt—but we also owe it to them to continue making the investments we know will strengthen our economy and make our country more competitive long-term.
- "That's why I am looking carefully for areas to cut spending, but I also know that lower spending levels will make it more difficult for Congress and for this Committee in particular to find ways to pay for important infrastructure programs.
- "I know many people think the answer to this problem lies in finding a source of funding outside of the annual appropriations process. The highway program and the Highway Trust Fund offer an easy example of a dedicated—and what has historically been a stable—source of funding for transportation infrastructure. But we should all understand that the financial constraints are just as real outside of the appropriations process.
- "The Highway Trust Fund has been threatened with insolvency for more than two years, and we still have not seen any realistic proposals to stabilize the trust fund throughout the next authorization period. This subcommittee has turned to appropriating funds directly from the general fund in order to provide additional investments in our nation's roads and transportation infrastructure during the current fiscal year.
- "So there is no silver bullet. There is no way to avoid making difficult decisions and setting priorities."
- "And while I believe that the Administration's budget request would make important investments in rail transportation, there are still significant concerns that this subcommittee will have to consider for fiscal year 2011.
- "The Administration has failed to request any funding for positive train control, an important new technology for preventing rail collisions and derailments. And the Administration's budget request for grants to Amtrak does not address the railroad's need to modernize its aging fleet.

"During this hearing we will have the opportunity to look into these important issues. In addition, we will be able to get additional details on the Administration's efforts to improve rail safety and, specifically, its progress in implementing a risk-based safety program.

"However, one of the biggest questions is how well the new leadership at the Federal Railroad Administration and at Amtrak can manage our investments in rail transportation over the long term.

"At the very beginning of the Obama Administration, the FRA was tasked with awarding \$8 billion in grants for intercity and high speed rail. The program was brand new, and as part of the Recovery Act, it needed to be set up immediately. Adding to those challenges, the FRA had never before administered such a significant grant program.

"Recent rail legislation has also added significantly to the agency's workload. FRA needs to manage its new responsibilities and build a workforce that has the skills necessary to successfully complete all of this work.

"Amtrak also has new leadership, and there is a new level of cooperation between its board and management team. They have worked aggressively to complete a new strategic plan, build a system for prioritizing its capital needs, and develop a plan for modernizing its fleet.

"But the real test of Amtrak's new leadership team will be as the railroad implements its new plans.

"This subcommittee needs to see that the leadership at the FRA and at Amtrak administer their programs and manage their funding effectively and responsibly.

"Both organizations face significant challenges in the years ahead, but we can't afford to waste taxpayer dollars or squander this unique opportunity to make our railroads work better for commuters, businesses, and communities across the county."

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