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"Investing in America: Funding our Nation's Transportation Infrastructure Needs"
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriation's Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
March 8, 2017

On behalf of Transportation for America and our alliance of local transportation, civic and business leaders across the country, I'd like to thank Chairman Collins and Ranking Member Reed for inviting me to testify today. Transportation for America seeks to ensure that local leaders are better represented in the federal program since this level is where most travel happens and where people and freight are getting stuck. We provide technical assistance to state and local transportation agencies as well as metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) on measuring the performance of the transportation system, implementing practical and multi-modal designs, and successful models for raising local money to support transportation.

As everyone testifying today will say, we have great need to invest in our transportation system, including our roads, bridges, and transit systems. We can all cite big numbers from many studies, such as the American Society of Civil Engineers infrastructure report card and the U.S. Department of Transportation's (USDOT) System and Performance report, explaining the challenge in stark numbers. However, Transportation for America believes that our problems run far deeper than just overall lack of funding.

To be clear, Transportation for America has been very supportive of more funding for this program and has produced a revenue proposal that suggests several specific ways that the federal government could raise more money for our nation's transportation needs, which can be found here: http://t4america.org/our-vision/investment. This funding should be long term and reliable so that transportation agencies can do the thoughtful planning and asset management necessary to maintain our national transportation system.

Because the bulk of the federal program is handled outside of the annual budget and appropriations process, we only sporadically talk about how this funding is spent or how we could get more from our sizable federal investment. Yet, the programs that this committee funds each year have an outsized role in promoting innovation, encouraging collaboration and maximizing benefits. I am speaking specifically about TIGER, New Starts, Small Starts, Core Capacity, and the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure & Safety Improvements (CRISI) programs.

These programs are a vital part of the solution to our transportation challenges. For decades now, Congress has consistently increased transportation spending with each successive reauthorization bill, sometimes by large amounts (like with TEA-21 and SAFETEA-LU) and sometimes more modestly (as in MAP-21 and the FAST Act). While some progress has been made, progress has been uneven and we are simply not getting the maximum benefit — even with increasing federal spending.

For one, we do nothing to require that current spending be prioritized for repairs. So while we all cite huge figures for mounting repair needs to make the case for investing more transportation dollars, there is no guarantee that the current transportation program — no matter how well funded — will actually repair our roads, bridges and transit systems.

In fact, a 2014 report conducted by Smart Growth America called "Repair Priorities" found that repair and maintenance was not getting its due. The report found that between 2009 and 2011, the latest year with available data at the time of the report, states collectively spent $20.4 billion annually to build new roadways and add lanes to existing roads. During that same time, states spent just $16.5 billion annually repairing and preserving the existing system, even while roads across the country were deteriorating. On a scale of good, fair or poor, 21 percent of America's roads were in poor condition in 2011. Just 37 percent of roads were in good condition that year—down from 41 percent in 2008.

In fairness, that report showed that not all states approach the problem equally, and some states dedicated a higher proportion of funding to repair and maintenance needs. In the years since, as funding has gotten tighter, some states report that they have increased their focus on state of repair needs. However, in my technical assistance work, I have found that some agencies classify expansions as state of repair projects if they feel they are bringing a road or bridge "to standard."

It's only fair to ask that the priorities of our transportation program more closely match the rhetoric we use to justify more spending on it — especially at a time when we are discussing major cuts that are likely to impact other major infrastructure spending programs, such as housing and stormwater.

There are some parts of the federal program that support aligning spending with priorities and also encourage innovation and leveraging of federal funds. These are the competitive grant programs, my favorite of which was created by this committee — the TIGER program. When I was at USDOT, my office managed this program. This program is by far the most popular at USDOT, and that is because it is the most flexible in terms of eligible uses (everything from ports to rail to transit to highways) and in terms of eligible recipients (any governmental entity).

In fact, this is one of the only programs that allow cities and counties to directly access federal funds.

This popularity stayed strong in spite of the fact that only 5-6 percent of applicants received any funding. In fact, part of my job was explaining to the 94-95 percent of applicants who didn't get funded why their applications weren't chosen. It is not easy to have a popular program when you are saying no to almost everyone. But through competition, applicants and stakeholders could see the enumerated strategic priorities of USDOT in the funded projects. The program encouraged project sponsors to try strategies they had never tried before — like design-build project delivery or complete street designs or public-private partnerships. While I was at USDOT, TIGER projects brought two non-federal dollars to the table for every one TIGER dollar they received. I have seen some analysis that shows this leveraging has continued to increase. I also saw project delivery complaints, like issues with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), fade away when project sponsors faced time constraints on the TIGER funding. Turns out that American cities and states will go a long way to beat out their neighbors and to keep a federal grant. Competition brings out the best.

TIGER, along with programs like New Starts, Small Starts, and the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure & Safety Improvements (CRISI) program, encourage transportation agencies to work with their sister agencies to coordinate funding streams and planning efforts.

One of the places where this can have the greatest impact is when transportation and development decisions are coordinated with one another to serve the same goals. Aligning transportation investments and development patterns can prevent transportation agencies from a complaint I regularly hear from transportation agencies is that they are continuously “chasing land uses.” They say as soon as they address one group of needs along a corridor, poorly designed development pops up and undercuts their investment, sending them back to the drawing board. Using competitive programs can reward those that interrupt this pattern, create better connectivity and avoid trying to fix poor land use choices with expensive (and often ineffective) transportation solutions.

I think about the two houses in Florida that are 70 feet apart but require a seven-mile drive to get from one to the other. Such a roadway and land use pattern is almost designed with the express purpose of generating traffic snarls. But the problem is not categorized as a development or road connectivity problem. It is put to the state and the federal government as a congestion problem that requires big spending to widen roads. I think about my brother’s house in Baton Rouge that is three blocks from the grocery store but he has to drive there because he is not willing to walk in 45 mph traffic with his kids. Then the mass of cars required to carry everyone on every three-block trip is presented not as a development and connectivity problem but as a traffic problem that requires big spending to widen roads.

When I was at USDOT, I would regularly hear from school districts that had sited a new school or consolidated schools to save money on facilities. Only after this investment was made did people think about the transportation burden they were putting on families and the cost that would be associated with busing everyone to schools that once were easily reached on foot. They would come to USDOT and present this not as siting error but as a transportation challenge that required transportation spending to fix.

Land use is a local issue, making it one of the reasons that local governments are essential to the transportation program. That is the level of governance that can best coordinate these efforts. However, we are starting to see states seek ways to better engage in the development conversation as well.

Governor Doug Burgum of North Dakota stated it about as well as anyone I’ve ever heard when talking about his Main Street Initiative. He calls for smart, efficient infrastructure as part of this initiative and explains why it is important this way:

> "A community's horizontal, low density expansion often results in a geographic footprint that is increasingly expensive over time, even to the point of becoming economically unsustainable. Larger footprints require communities to invest more in virtually every category—from new water towers, sewer lines and sewage systems, to streetlights, sidewalks, snow plows, lawnmowers, garbage collection, and more. And these aren't one-time costs—they're ongoing expenses that require personnel and maintenance, year after year.
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> "Ultimately, this leads to bigger government, higher property taxes, and unsustainable spending.
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> "As one example, let's look at three cities: Fargo, North Dakota; Ann Arbor, Michigan; and Boulder, Colorado. All of these cities have comparable populations, yet Fargo's geographic footprint (about 49 sq. miles) is nearly twice as large as either Ann Arbor or Boulder. This means that in Fargo, there are more roads to plow and patrol, more pipes to fix, and an overall larger infrastructure to maintain, for a similar population. Fargo now has over 2,000 lane miles of roads to plow after each snow storm. That's almost twice as long as the distance from Fargo to Frisco, Texas.
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> "Simply put, one of the major determinants of cost for a city or community is linear feet. The more linear feet, the greater the cost of everything."[*]

I am sure Governor Burgum is not calling for the federal government to get involved in local land use decisions. No one is calling for that. It is not an issue that can be handled through federal dictates or regulation. However, it is not a cost burden that the federal taxpayer should have to bear either. Through competitive programs that this committee funds, the federal government can reward the states and local leaders that are coordinating land use and transportation to encourage less expensive local development patterns. This can reduce the need for humungous funding increases and make the case to the American taxpayer that we are maximizing federal investment and not passively reacting to and throwing money at the problems caused by inefficient land use patterns.

Competition can also make it possible to reward those that are getting more out of their transportation investment. With the new federal rules requiring states and MPOs to measure the performance of their transportation system in terms of safety, state of repair and system reliability, transportation leaders will set goals for their programs and report to stakeholders and the public whether they have met their own goals. While the new federal rules are rather gentle — transportation agencies set their own targets, grade their own papers and suffer no real consequence for failure — these rules are an important first step to greater transparency in this program and to

[*] https://dougburgum.com/main-street-initiative/

making clear to stakeholders and the public how far current spending can really take us in meeting federal, state and local policy objectives.

My organization works with overachieving transportation leaders that want to go beyond the federal minimum requirements and more typical engineering measures to consider metrics like transportation costs and access to jobs, education and essential services. Finding ways to reward agencies that set tougher performance targets, get greater results and use more innovative outcome measures is going to be an important task for Congress in the future. The competitive programs that you all fund can play a significant role.

While I started this testimony by pointing out that federal funding is not the sole answer to addressing our nation's transportation needs, I do want to make clear that federal funding is essential. Across the country, our cities, rural towns and suburbs — the local centers of commerce that form the backbone of America's economy — are in a serious bind: They know they must have top-notch transportation networks to attract talent, compete on a global scale and preserve their quality of life. They know they need to get workers of all wage levels to jobs. They also know they need to eliminate crippling bottlenecks in freight delivery. These communities are stretching themselves to raise their own funds and to innovate, but they cannot bring these important projects to fruition without a strong federal funding partner. The programs that this committee funds are often the lynchpin for aiding states and localities in meeting the twin demands of maintaining their existing infrastructure and preparing for the future.