



Field Briefing, United States Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

Testimony by Mr. Paul Jablonski on Reauthorization of the Federal Surface Transportation Act

November 14, 2008, San Diego, California

Thank you for inviting me to testify today regarding the Reauthorization of the Surface Transportation Act.

One of the greatest challenges in the reauthorization process will be to balance available funding with the increasingly urgent need to address global warming and energy security. Congress will need to strike that balance when deciding how to fund transportation for the next five years. Investment in our nation's public transportation systems is critical to the success of US policies on emissions reduction and energy independence.

It is increasingly clear that we must reduce the number of cars on the road significantly. A recent Greenhouse Gas Inventory for the San Diego region conducted by the Energy Policy Initiative Center at the University of San Diego concluded that on-road transportation is responsible for 46% of total greenhouse gas emissions in the County. Transit offers people options. This year we have seen incredible numbers of people choose to get out of their cars and try public transportation. MTS gained 26,200 new daily riders last year, for a savings in CO2 emissions of at least 67 metric tons. And we have seen a commensurate decline in the number of cars on the local highways. All of this translates into improved mobility, a decreased reliance on fossil fuels, and better air quality.

Despite the surge in public interest in transit we are facing sharp reductions in our operating subsidies. The economic downturn and declines in sales tax revenues have taken a toll on MTS's budget. The State of California's own fiscal crisis has caused it to take transit funds for other General Fund purposes, thereby worsening the problem. MTS will have lost \$54 million to the state in this budget year alone, the equivalent of more than 25% of our annual operating budget, all during a boom in ridership. Funding for transit is declining at a time when an increased investment is needed the most.

Reauthorization brings an opportunity for Congress to achieve stated national transportation, environmental, economic, and energy goals. The way to do this is through increased recognition of transit's importance. Now more than ever, the federal investment in our nation's transit systems needs to rise.

One way the federal government has helped to build transit use in San Diego was the investment in the Mission Valley East extension of the Trolley. San Diego used its Full Funding Grant Agreement under the New Starts program to build an incredibly successful extension of its light rail system. The new line connects major jobs and housing areas, including San Diego State University and the Grantville redevelopment area. Since its opening in 2005, we have broken all projections for ridership, already exceeding the 2015 goal of 7,400 daily passengers. SDSU Station alone generates 11,350 trips, and just three years after its opening, one in five students travels to the campus by Trolley every day. In addition, the Trolley has proven to be an economic driver, bringing transit oriented development to areas previously underutilized.

Under Reauthorization, the San Diego region will again ask the federal government for assistance in extending this critical transportation infrastructure. Locally we have set aside 50% of the anticipated cost of the extension to the northern part of the City of San Diego. This project will connect downtown San Diego with another large population and job center to the north. And as was the case with Mission Valley East, this project will connect a major university campus, UCSD, to the trolley. MTS has proven its ability to deliver successful rail projects and asks that this Committee include a New Starts designation for the Mid-Coast Light Rail Extension in the next transportation act.

In addition to needing funding to expand our capacity, San Diego's transit systems are in need of significant capital investments to keep their aging infrastructure in a state of good repair. Rail systems are built heavy duty but that does not mean they will last forever. The San Diego Trolley has been a great success story but it is nearly 30 years old and was built on an existing railroad that is over 70 years old. There are significant rail rehabilitation needs in systems such as the Trolley, and I would like to see the Rail Modernization program restructured to provide more funding for these younger yet still aging properties. The current program gives the overwhelming majority of the funding to a few rail properties, with less recognition of the needs of less mature systems. Expanding the program under this Reauthorization, and using the additional funding to help systems like San Diego, will be critical for maintaining the public's initial investment.

To wrap up, thank you for holding this field briefing in San Diego. Congress has a great opportunity to make a lasting impact on the nation with the next transportation act. A balanced plan that enhances public transportation will provide rewards for generations to come.