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**Testimony of
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“Future Federal Role for Surface Transportation”
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Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Inhofe, and Members of the Committee, I am Kathleen Marvaso, Vice President of Public Affairs for AAA. Thank you for inviting me to speak with you today regarding the “Future Federal Role for Surface Transportation.”

As you may know, AAA is a federation of motor clubs in the U.S. and Canada serving over 51 million members. Our members are prime users and beneficiaries of the nation’s surface transportation system. They drive approximately 25 percent of all motor vehicles in operation in the U.S. They are commuters, leisure travelers, users of public transportation. And while most of the time they don’t give it a lot of thought, transportation plays a vital role in their lives, and underpins the economic well-being of this nation.

The Interstate Highway System brought us a world-class transportation network, and its development tracks with a period of economic prosperity, growth and change unimaginable in the past. But our investment did not keep pace with the maintenance and expansion needs of the system. Today we face an enormous funding challenge, where we have to contemplate asking users who are already highly skeptical of how their money is spent, to pay more – at a time when they are dealing with record-high fuel prices, and a tough economy.

AAA’s interest in the transportation system has always been focused on personal safety and mobility, and we face serious challenges in both regards in terms of the number of crashes, injuries and deaths on our roadways, and increasing congestion which disrupts personal schedules and economic activity.

Our organization has traditionally supported a strong Federal role in transportation, especially as it relates to safety. We believe that significantly more investment is needed, and we’re willing to consider all options that put the public interest ahead of all else. But we’re not in favor of just maintaining the status quo. And judging by the challenges we face, that isn’t really even an option.

This committee, and certainly the entire 111th Congress next year, has a historic challenge of re-assessing the purpose and structure of the federal transportation program. While continuing with the status quo in the next reauthorization is not acceptable, neither is an automatic, whole-sale change from the structures and practices that are currently in place. We face a serious shortfall in funding, and all of the solutions involve asking users to pay more, whether through higher motor fuel taxes, or user fees and tolls. This at a time when public perception of the federal transportation program is not positive. There is no doubt that the so-called “bridge to nowhere” contributed to the negative view the public holds and that has overshadowed many positive aspects of the last reauthorization. Recent AAA research reveals the public is very skeptical about the transportation program, and wary of all levels of government – not just the federal program. Most don’t believe current revenue is being invested wisely, and many don’t believe any additional investment is needed. This negative public perception constitutes a major hurdle to effecting good policy that serves the nation.

Asking the public to pay more into a system they don’t trust, for roads they don’t fully appreciate, at a time when they are already stretched financially, is going to be challenging. In order for the public to rally behind the kind of investments that are likely going to be needed to address growing demands for transportation and to maintain our global economic competitiveness, we need to do a lot of education, but certainly we also need to acknowledge their frustration and respond with changes that lead to improvements the public can perceive. It will take vision and leadership, and a willingness among stakeholders to make concessions that are in the country’s best interest. President Eisenhower’s Interstate vision of going “coast to coast without a stop light” gave the nation a unifying, common goal and purpose. It’s time to move forward with a new vision of how transportation can provide personal mobility and economic prosperity into the next century. It won’t be easy.

Fortunately, a lot of good work is already being done in this area, by the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission and others, that should serve as a guide for you as you rethink how the federal program should be structured and funded.

As I have already said, from AAA’s perspective, there remains a compelling need for federal leadership and involvement in the surface transportation program, albeit in a revised and restructured form. Issues that impact the nation’s economic vitality and global competitiveness (like freight mobility and congestion) deserve a national focus. We also believe safety is an area where national leadership is required.

You are all familiar with the statistics – over 42,000 people die each year in the U.S. as a result of motor vehicle crashes. That’s about 117 deaths per day, and nearly 5 every hour. Millions more are injured each year. While concern over the high number of fatalities on our roadways seems to be strong among safety organizations, the research community and in all levels of government, we seem to be stalled in our efforts to save lives. 42,000 roadway deaths is a number that should ring alarm bells nationwide for an urgent call to action. Yet, we’ve come to accept this sort of death toll with car crashes. This has to change.

Motor vehicle crashes are a public health threat and should be treated as such. When you think about other high profile public health challenges – tobacco use, air quality issues, food safety – it is expected that the federal government has a role in protecting the public interest. The same should be true with traffic safety.

If the fatality and injury numbers alone are not a sufficient argument for renewed federal leadership in traffic safety - consider the economic and quality of life impacts. Recently AAA joined with Cambridge Systematics to conduct a first-of-its kind study of the societal costs of crashes as compared to congestion. The report calculates the costs of crashes for the same metropolitan areas covered by the annual *Urban Mobility Report* conducted by the Texas Transportation Institute. We found the societal cost of crashes is a staggering \$164.2 billion annually in the urban areas studied, nearly two and a half times greater than the \$67.6 billion price tag for congestion.

In every metropolitan area studied, from very large to small, the results showed crash costs exceeded congestion costs. For very large urban areas (more than 3 million), crash costs are nearly double those of congestion. Those costs rise to more than seven times congestion costs in small urban areas (less than 500,000) where congestion is less of a challenge. The \$164.2 billion cost for crashes equates to an annual per person cost of \$1,051, compared to \$430 per person annually for congestion. These safety costs include medical, emergency and police services, property damage, lost productivity, and quality of life, among other things.

Although we believe there is a compelling need for a national focus on safety, here too, there is a need to re-think existing approaches. We need an increased focus on results and metrics in order to properly evaluate current safety programs so we invest in those projects and programs that are truly having an impact. We need to employ new approaches to changing behavior – arguably the greatest challenge we face in reducing the staggering number of fatalities each year. We also need to escape the federal agencies silo-mentality and coordinate inter-agency communications more effectively. Cooperation and joint planning at all levels of government between health, transportation, and justice system professionals will help restore trust, create accountability, and deliver success. All of these sectors must work closely to develop new and better ways to address the epidemic loss of life on our highways.

Greater safety improvements can only be achieved by accepting the crisis we're in, marshalling leaders both in the public and private sector, and focusing our national discourse on issues related to the human and economic costs of neglecting traffic safety. It is difficult to imagine what the safety atmosphere would look like absent federal leadership, guidance and oversight. I am not optimistic that states would make safety a priority. There are too many other competing demands.

The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, which was tasked by SAFETEA-LU to examine the appropriate federal role for various aspects of the current transportation program, agrees that safety should be a top federal priority. Both the minority and majority opinion stated that safety programs and research needs related to national goals are a proper function of federal government expenditure.

That leads me to one other area that is in dire need of a continued federal focus – data. Without good data, we can't measure what's working, whether it's in safety, freight mobility, congestion, or other programs. Limited transportation dollars must be applied more effectively throughout the system by increasing the focus on testing and evaluation. We need to move towards a more performance-based, outcome-driven approach. To accomplish this transformation, we need much better data collection and analysis in order to understand if we are reaching future national and state mobility and safety goals.

AAA recognizes that the challenges before you are not easy. The prospect of completely reforming the federal transportation program in one year's time makes the challenges associated with getting SAFETEA-LU passed seem minor. But this re-examination is long past due and is imperative if we want the public's buy-in going forward.

If we fail to understand the amount of mistrust the public has in our ability to deliver recognizable transportation improvements and be good stewards of the motorists' dollar, we will fail in reducing fatalities, fail in cutting commute-times, and fail to grow our economy in a way that keeps us globally competitive. AAA is prepared to do our part to educate our members and the public on the importance of transportation investments and the need for program reforms. We also look forward to working with all of you over the next 18 months to accomplish this important task.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today and I look forward to answering any questions you may have.