

**TESTIMONY OF OKLAHOMA STATE SENATOR BRYCE MARLATT**  
**U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee**  
**Mobility and Congestion in Urban and Rural America**  
**March 18, 2010**

Madam Chairman, Ranking Member Inhofe, and members of the Committee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify about the transportation needs for rural America. I represent Oklahoma's Senate District 27. My district covers an eight county area in rural northwestern Oklahoma. My district not only covers the largest area of any other senate district, it is the largest district in the Oklahoma State Legislature. I also serve as vice-chairman of the State Senate Committee on Transportation. I work on and understand the transportation needs of rural America. I also understand that in developing the next federal highway reauthorization bill, meeting urban and rural transportation needs will be a challenging endeavor.

Approximately 60 million people, 21 percent of the nation's population, live in rural communities in the United States. This is an increase of approximately 11 percent since 1990. Millions of Americans travel on our rural county and state road systems everyday. Rural roads are vast throughout the country and have significant needs. The county highway system in Oklahoma is comprised of nearly 85,000 miles. Oklahoma's rural nature and historically agricultural based economy has witnessed the conversion of many farm-to-market roads into highways. While these roads were ideal for transporting livestock and crops to market, they are less than adequate when supporting today's heavier trucks, increased traffic demands and higher operating speeds. In fact, based on an evaluation of safety features such as passing opportunities, adequate sight distances, the existence of paved shoulders, recovery areas for errant vehicles, and the severity of hills and curves; 24% of our 12,266 miles of rural highways alone rate as critical or inadequate. Over 4,700 miles of Oklahoma highways are two-lane roads without shoulders. This lack of adequate capacity for Oklahoma's rural highways prevents rural Oklahoma from participating fully in the state's economy. We will never have the jobs and the economic development we need in rural Oklahoma if we don't address our infrastructure.

Rural roads also pose unique challenges. For example, generally speaking, rural roads have a greater rate of traffic fatalities than urban roads. Rural accidents occur at an alarming

rate and the severity of the collisions is significant. When specifically considering the accidents that occur on Oklahoma's critical or inadequate highways, 86% happen on rural two lane roads. However, many of these critically needed highway safety improvements that could prevent property damage, personal injuries, and the tragic loss of life remain unattended due to a lack of funding. In particular, I have been working to upgrade Oklahoma Highway 270 which stretches from west of Oklahoma City through northwestern Oklahoma and through the Oklahoma Panhandle. Currently the Oklahoma Department of Transportation has plans for each section of this crucial corridor through 2017. These upgrades are planned in each county from Canadian County through Woodward and through the Panhandle. It is extremely important to me from the perspective of safety, jobs, and participating in the Oklahoma and national economy for this 270 corridor to be completely modernized.

The nation's rural bridges also have unique needs. For example, Oklahoma has over 14,000 county bridges, 62% of Oklahoma's bridges. Of the over 6,700 bridges on the state highway system alone, some 5,600 are on rural highways. When considering the 6,700 highway bridges, over 1,400 are either too narrow to support today's traffic or have structural deficiencies, or both. More than 1,100 of the 1,400 bridges or 78% exist on highways in rural areas. In addition, rural commerce can be severely impacted by bridges with restricted load limits as detours can add many miles to a trip, and a price is paid through the cost of time and fuel. In Oklahoma, we are doing everything we can to accelerate our bridge replacement and rehabilitation efforts. However, State funding alone cannot keep pace with the deterioration of our system.

It is imperative that our rural highways and bridges be returned to and kept in a state of good repair. These highways move entire sectors of our economy including agriculture, energy, forestry, and tourism to mention a few. Steady, predictable, and increasing funding sources are necessary because consistent funding allows our transportation professionals to plan our progress and affords the opportunity for our contractors to develop their workforces and construct our roads and bridges as efficiently as possible. States and local units of government alone cannot finance, construct and maintain a national system of highways. A strong Federal commitment is

necessary to insure the continuity and viability of our transportation infrastructure far into the future. Since the current federal highway authorization expired on September 30, 2009, states have been operating under a string of continuing resolutions which cost Oklahoma about \$15 million a month. The Congress' recent action extending the Federal Highway Program through the end of the year is a significant help while a new reauthorization bill is under development, and Oklahoma is consistently proud of the work of our senior senator to meet Oklahoma's long-term rural and urban transportation needs.

However, the states want to do our part to find new funding solutions to our nation's transportation needs. Over last three years, there has been an approximate 5% decline in the Oklahoma motor fuel tax due to less demand and increased fuel efficiencies in cars. This has resulted in about a \$30 million loss in revenues for my state's roads and bridges. As vice chairman of the Oklahoma Senate Transportation Committee, I have authored Oklahoma Senate Bill 1941 to create the "Innovative Funding for Oklahoma Roads Task Force" for the purpose of studying and evaluating innovations, technologies, and new methods being employed nationally and by other states to more adequately and equitably fund road and bridge infrastructure, including both new construction and maintenance. This legislation passed the Oklahoma Senate 46-0 on March 1, and I would expect quick consideration of the legislation in the State House. Maintenance funding for roads and bridges is always an immediate need. Currently, the funding sources of fuel and gross production taxes fluctuate a great deal. The Federal fuel tax is also in decline, and I don't think anyone has the desire to see fuel taxes increased at the state or federal level in these tough economic times.

Therefore, we need to start the candid and serious dialog on how to begin looking at adequately funding our roads through alternative financing. Undeniably, what is decided at the Federal level with the next authorization of the Federal Highway Law will greatly impact urban and rural Oklahoma. Changes made to the funding formulas and how they are distributed must take into account the nation's rural areas and populations. While public transit and things such as high-speed rail, may make sense for densely populated areas, in rural Oklahoma we are still focused on the fundamental need to more adequately fund roads and bridges. As such, I

respectfully urge this Committee to consider the vast needs of rural America and to continue making the backbone and core of our nation's infrastructure – our existing roads and bridges – a top priority.

Of equal importance to meeting our transportation funding needs is how we expand our nation's usage of abundant natural resources, harness those alternative energies for mobility in goods, people, and services and then ultimately how we tie those back to transportation infrastructure funding.

In Oklahoma, we passed significant legislation to increase the usage of Compressed Natural Gas, known as CNG. Last year, the Oklahoma Legislature passed House Bill 1949, which is part of an ongoing statewide energy initiative, which extends an existing tax credit on the purchase of a qualified clean-burning motor vehicle for five years for compressed and liquefied natural gas and electric cars. The credit is equal to 50 percent of the cost of a conversion of vehicles to operate on a qualified fuel, as well as those originally equipped to do so.

We also provided a tax credit for businesses seeking to build infrastructure to fuel such vehicles, along with a \$2,500 tax credit for consumers installing home-fueling stations. Our hope is that these new credits will help double the number of publicly available CNG fueling stations across the state.

However, in the face of the declining fuel tax, as these alternatives become more widely used, we must also ensure these users are providing an equitable portion of infrastructure funding, in order to prepare for the future.

We have made great strides in investing in transportation infrastructure reversing the tide of declining funding for Oklahoma's roads and bridges. I know that with innovation and determination, other states are working hard to meet their states' rural and urban transportation needs. However, we will never have the jobs and the economic development we need in rural

and urban America if we don't address our infrastructure. I appreciate this Committee's work toward addressing the needs of our national transportation infrastructure.