

Statement of  
The Honorable Sharon Thomas  
Councilwoman; Mayor Pro Tem  
City of Las Cruces, NM

Before the  
Committee on Environment and Public Works hearing on  
“Issues for Surface Transportation Authorization”

April 14, 2011

Chairwoman Boxer and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am a retired English professor who moved to Las Cruces, New Mexico, in 2003. In 2007, I ran for city council and was elected.

Las Cruces is a town of 97,618 (2010 census), located in the Mesilla Valley, between the Organ Mountains and the Rio Grande, 45 miles north of El Paso, Texas. Las Cruces has received several awards including rankings from *Money* magazine as one of the “best college towns to retire in” and from AARP as one of their “dream towns” for retirement.

Since election to the city council, I have served on the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO), on the South Central Regional Council of Governments, and on our newly formed South Central Regional Transit District.

When I first moved to Las Cruces, my interest was focused more on planning neighborhoods where residents can live, work, and play. Since that time, I have come to realize that it’s all connected.

How a community is laid out—roads, transit, pedestrian and bicycling facilities, open space, public areas, commercial areas, housing choices, economic development, health issues—are all related. So, of course, when the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Housing and Urban Development (HUD), and the Department of Transportation (DOT) formed the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, I knew I had found the model for combining land-use and transportation planning.

In 2009, our project, Picturing El Paseo, was one of four chosen to participate in EPA’s technical assistance program to help us develop a vision for the street that connects our downtown and New Mexico State University. When EPA joined the Sustainable Communities Partnership, Picturing El Paseo became part of that program as well.

During 2010, we worked with our federal partners and community participants to develop our vision. In that vision, El Paseo Road would be transformed from a vehicle clogged, dying, strip-mall-lined street into a mixed use, pedestrian and bicycle friendly, tree-lined boulevard, with multiple transportation options, a range of housing choices, and plenty of public gathering places. That is what the community told us they wanted.

At our Transportation Summit, in September 2010, we heard similar messages from the over 100 in attendance. We passed on those suggestions to Sec. Ray La Hood when he visited our city in October of 2010.

In New Mexico, too often, transportation planners have torn out our Main Streets (for better traffic “flow”) and destroyed our small towns. We want to see transportation planning that takes into account *all* users of the roadway, as well as the surrounding context for that roadway.

As part of the Surface Transportation Authorization, we would like to see financial support for livable communities projects, such as the recent TIGER grants, that can help us build communities that are safer, more livable, and welcoming to everyone.

As the coalition for sustainable communities has grown across the county, we have noticed the addition of one more adjective—“healthy.” In Las Cruces, we are particularly interested in *healthy*, sustainable communities because of our high rates of childhood obesity and diabetes.

When schools are *not* accessible by biking and walking, students lose an important daily opportunity to exercise. Unfortunately, the schools in our city have typically been located on busy streets, fenced off from surrounding neighborhoods, and primarily designed for students to be dropped off by vehicle.

Our Safe Routes to Schools program is changing all that. We now have walk and bike to school programs, bicycle safety classes, more bike lanes and bike racks, and better sidewalk markings.

As Congress moves forward on Surface Transportation Authorization, we would like to see greater recognition of the impact transportation planning has on the health of communities, and more support for programs like the SRTS program.

Certainly, our local projects cannot continue without new Surface Transportation Authorization. As you move forward with that legislation, I hope you will recognize the impact transportation facilities have on all aspects of our communities, and work toward a new vision for transportation legislation and policies that do away with the silos that currently exist between land use and transportation planning so that we can promote communities that are healthy, livable, and sustainable.

Thank you the opportunity to appear before you today. I am looking forward to a new Surface Transportation Authorization that will coordinate transportation planning with housing, land use planning, and economic development so that all Americans can live in healthy, sustainable communities.