

Opening Statement to Environmental and Public Works Committee 3-27-14

Madame Chairman, Ranking Member Vitter, and Members of the committee:

It is an honor and a privilege to testify before you today. My name is Bill Fontenot. I am a professional civil engineer that had the pleasure of working thirty-eight years for the Louisiana DOTD of which the last eighteen years of that career was serving as the Regional District Engineer Administrator for the eight parish Acadiana region. The Acadiana region is where Mardi Gras is less about parades, kings and queens, but more about dressing in colorful costumes and masks and riding horses through the countryside, chasing chickens and guineas to be included as ingredients to a delicious gumbo dinner during the evening before Ash Wednesday.

I retired from Louisiana DOTD in 2011 and now currently serve as the president of St. Landry Parish Government in south Louisiana. I am pleased and proud to introduce you to St. Landry Parish Councilmen Jerry Red, Jimmie Edwards and Timmy Lejeune along with our Director of Operations, Jessie Bellard, who have accompanied me to Washington DC to visit with you. They are here in the room today.

These councilmen, with a majority of others, and I worked very hard over the first two years of my administration to convince parish voters that roads on the local level were never going to meet the level of service that they so wanted and needed. There existed no dedicated local funds for road improvements ever in the history of the parish. This effort of hard work resulted, I am happy to report in the passage this past October of a two cent sales tax, fifteen year referendum in "rural areas only" that will be dedicated solely to improving parish roads. History was made. Our voters were finally convinced that we as citizens of the parish needed to learn how to buckle our own boot straps relative to our local highway issues.

I am here to tell you that this sales tax will go a long way to mending our roads but we will continue to need federal assistance to make the best of meeting the very expensive requirements to replace the many bridges that are deficient.

Therefore, I would like to offer the following priorities for your consideration during the development of the next surface transportation bill:

Frist, we ask that you continue the federal funding set-aside for off-system bridges and consider increasing overall funding for bridge replacement and rehabilitation.. The nation's counties, which we are considered one of, own a significant amount of the nation's off-system bridges. In fact, off-system bridges represent 76.5% of counties' bridge inventory. Overall, off-system bridges represent 47% of the national bridge inventory. And this is a particular issue to us because Louisiana parishes own 33% of our state's public bridges.

Second, we respectfully request that you work hard to achieve the timely passage of a federal surface transportation bill that provides increased, stable and long-term funding so that federal, state and local highway planners can create logical strategies to address highway needs. The political leadership at all levels needs to support this as our citizens do not understand or appreciate the lack of it. Our economy depends on it. Our quality of life depends on it.

Third, a specific federal change needed, that may fall beyond the scope of today's discussion, is the federal wetlands banking requirements whereby the right of way ratio at times ranges from 3 -1 to 5 -1. This exorbitant cost will cause some valid projects not to be constructed under this mandate. We ask that you look at reducing this requirement and also allowing purchasing current wetlands areas in advance for credit in consideration of future projects. This is currently not allowed.

Fourth, relative to what was once called transportation enhancement funding, now known as transportation alternatives funding. MAP-21 provided states the ability to obligate this funding to eligible projects through a competitive process. This process, at least in our state, is so procedurally complex that many local governments will be hesitant to spend time, energy and money to apply for such funding that could really benefit communities.

Fifth, we ask for increased federal funding for improvements to minor road connectors that are so important to local commerce relative to moving goods,

mobility for jobs and recreation, all boosting economy and quality of life. A special rule in MAP-21 allows States to use up to 15% of the Surface Transportation Program funds suballocated for areas with a population of 5,000 or less on rural minor collectors. We would like to see this expanded to a greater percentage and to areas exceeding a population of 5,000.

Sixth, and finally, we support and encourage necessary federal funding to complete I-49 south in Louisiana.

I wish to acknowledge and thank the National Association of Counties for their untiring efforts working with local governments and congress to create a quality highway bill.

Thank you so much for allowing me to speak today and for your dedicated service to our good old USA.

W. K. Bill Fontenot

President

St. Landry Parish, Louisiana