

Madame Chair and members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify on the importance of the issues that are addressed in the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill. My name is Michael Lewis and I am the Director of the Rhode Island Department of Transportation. I am also on the Board of Directors of the Rhode Island Public Transit Authority, the Rhode Island Turnpike and Bridge Authority, and the Rhode Island Public Rail Corporation.

Today I will focus my testimony on three main points:

1. Rhode Island has made great strides in effectively managing our transportation system using all the tools and resources currently available to us;
2. Despite sound and creative management efforts, Rhode Island is facing a critical crisis in preserving and rehabilitating our existing infrastructure; and
3. Rhode Island will need an increase in federal funding and more flexibility in the use of these federal resources in order to make progress in bringing our highway infrastructure into a state of good repair.

Rhode Island has 1,102 miles of roadway, approximately 750 bridges, and a staff of 770 hard-working men and women.

Rhode Island has effectively and efficiently managed its transportation resources using innovative approaches, including TIFIA loans, GARVEE bonds, and performance measures. Using the tools and resources we have had available, we have relocated a portion of Interstate 95 in the heart of Providence; undertaken a freight rail improvement project that has led to the expansion of commuter rail service from Boston to Providence and points further south in Rhode Island; and we are currently replacing a vital bridge link to Aquidneck Island that leads to Newport, the biggest tourist destination in the State.

Rhode Island's transportation infrastructure suffers from underinvestment. A December 2008 Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel Report entitled, "Rhode Island's Transportation Future: Reinvesting in our Transportation System" stated that in order to maintain our highway system in a state of good repair, the state would need to spend approximately \$640 million per year.

Current state and federal highway funding provides about \$354 million. We would have to spend nearly double this amount for 10 years just to get to that state of good repair.

The funding gap is \$285 million per year. The gap continues to widen as the cost of construction materials increases, revenue derived from the gas tax decreases, and the infrastructure continues to age and deteriorate.

Decades of under-investment in maintenance has resulted in a downward spiral of the condition of the highway infrastructure. At the time of the report, over 20 percent of Rhode Island's bridges were structurally deficient, nearly 30 percent were functionally obsolete, eight percent were posted, and nearly two percent were closed.

The Pawtucket River Bridge, with an average daily traffic volume of 103,300 vehicles, sits in the fourth-largest city in the state. It is a vital part of Interstate 95, connecting New York to Boston and is critical to mobility and commerce in the Northeast Corridor. Despite this essential goods and services connection, the bridge was posted at 18 tons in May 2008. All trucks over 18 tons must use alternate routes.

Detours cause delays. Time is money. This cannot be sustained in the current economic climate. We have funded this \$81 million project at the expense of delaying other needed projects and the replacement of the Pawtucket River Bridge isn't expected to be completed until 2013.

The Providence Viaduct, with an average daily traffic volume of 230,000 vehicles, is just a few miles south of the Pawtucket River Bridge and also sits right on the I-95 corridor. This time, however, the structure is in the heart of the Capital City. It is one of the top three most traveled segments along the entire Maine to Miami I-95 corridor.

The Providence Viaduct has undergone some repairs, but replacement is now the sole option available. The repairs only work as a Band-Aid approach to prevent another posting like the one in Pawtucket.

The cost of bringing this bridge into a state of good repair is nearly every available dollar we receive in just one year -- \$150 million out of \$170 million total, after the GARVEE debt service. Funding this major project means other important projects will have to wait.

Rhode Island is not building new roads. Fix it First has been our philosophy for many years. RIDOT cannot build its way out of congestion, and investing in bus and rail transit are the only way to increase travel capacity in our state.

Exacerbating the problem in Rhode Island is the state's practice of borrowing to provide the required match to federal transportation funds. Debt service is using more and more of the state's gas tax revenue, reducing the available funding to perform preventative maintenance.

Governor Lincoln Chafee does recognize the position we are in. He has a plan to get the Department out of its long-term debt. Adoption of this plan will help in the future, but in the meantime we still have to be able to maintain our infrastructure, handle congestion, and pay for traffic control, snow removal, pothole repairs and other bridge and roadway needs.

Additional federal funding is needed to bring our infrastructure into a state of good repair and to help in the state's economic recovery. Even without additional funding, the new authorization bill can help by providing flexibility. Now is not the time to tie our hands and limit the use of transportation dollars and assets.

It is imperative that the Federal government, first, continues to invest in highways, as well as transit, second, address the needs of metropolitan, suburban, and rural areas, and, finally, to meet preservation and capacity needs. Increasing funding for transportation is a sound investment in rebuilding the nation's economy.

As you are so aware, this transportation funding crisis comes at a time of economic downturn for our state and our country. Rhode Island entered this economic downturn first and is moving toward growth slowly. We currently have the fourth-highest unemployment rate in the nation. The state not only needs an infrastructure system in good repair, it needs highway and bridge improvement projects that can employ its citizens.

We might be the smallest state in the union, but our fiscal problems are mighty. The time to act is now.

RIDOT is looking over the edge of that cliff. We've run out of road and changing direction is our only option. What happens in the Ocean State to our transportation infrastructure has local, state, and national implications. Should the Pawtucket River Bridge or Providence Viaduct have to be taken out of service, hundred of thousands of motorists, goods and services will face unimaginable delays.

Increasing flexibility to the states for tolling, public-private partnerships to allow commercial use of the transportation rights-of-way, and innovative financing is essential to allow states to leverage the assistance we get from federal funding. Maintaining a strong federal partnership with the states is also essential to our success. We must recognize the unique challenges facing each state, while working towards our common goal. Perhaps this is most apparent if we try to compare the needs of Rhode Island to those of your state of California, Madame Chair. One size does not fit all.

I look forward to working with you to address the daunting task ahead. However, with increased flexibility, funding and a strong partnership, I believe we can succeed.

Thank you again for this opportunity and I would be glad to answer any questions you might have.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

The December 23, 2008 Governor's Blue Ribbon Panel Report entitled, "Rhode Island's Transportation Future: Reinvesting in our Transportation System" can be found online at: <http://www.dot.ri.gov/blueribbon/reports/BPRReporttoGovernor.pdf>