Senate Environment and Public Works Committee

"Building Back Better: Investing in Transportation while Addressing Climate Change, Improving Equity, and Fostering Economic Growth and Innovation"

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Written Testimony
of
The Honorable Michael B. Hancock
Mayor of City and County of Denver

Chairman Carper, Ranking Member Capito, and senators.

Thank you for this opportunity to participate today in this hearing. I am Michael Hancock, Mayor of the City and County of Denver.

Mr. Chairman, I want to commend you for convening this hearing, and for giving me the opportunity to share my views on the transportation landscape before us, which I believe COVID-19 has altered significantly, and even permanently in ways we are still trying to comprehend.

My testimony focuses largely on the City and County of Denver and the broader Denver region, providing perspectives from my local area that will be similar to what you hear from mayors in your own states and throughout the nation. I will also provide some broader context for my views, drawing upon my role as Chairman of the Transportation and Communications Committee of The United States Conference of Mayors, the bipartisan organization of the nation's mayors representing cities with a population of 30,000 or more.

Before addressing the specific issues before this Committee, I want to explain to you briefly why I support President Biden's "American Rescue Plan."

COVID-19 has ravaged families and upended lives and our economy in so many ways. It continues to threaten our public health, today and well into the future. As the mayor of a major local government, as well as one with considerably immense public health responsibility, we still have much to do to bring this pandemic under control and get our economy back to where it needs to be.

A few months ago, I cut nearly $200 million from my budget, working hard to protect our first responders and other governmental workers. Absent fiscal relief and other commitments included in this Rescue Plan, local governments in the Denver region will be forced to make more spending cuts and layoffs. Later in my testimony, I provide additional details about how COVID-19 has impacted Denver, including how it has affected transportation and other infrastructure investment.

The rescue plan now before you addresses the most immediate challenges before our cities and before the nation; invests in actions that are needed now; and makes additional federal funding commitments that will make a real difference for our residents in the places where they live and work. As mayors, we had to make the tough choices, so on behalf of all counties, cities and towns, I want to especially highlight the need for state and local fiscal relief. These resources will help stabilize the financials of the governments on the front lines of this pandemic.

Mr. Chairman, as a former Governor, you are well aware of state and local finance issues, and I want to thank you for your efforts as you work with your colleagues to sound the alarm on the immediate need for help. Thank you for your leadership on this matter.

ISTEA and FAST Renewal

Thirty years ago, this Committee developed legislation that became the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA). This landmark transportation law – which originated in this Committee as a bipartisan proposal – advanced through the 102nd Congress and was enacted largely as originally envisioned by your predecessors.

Among ISTEA's defining features, whether its "flexible" funding, clean air funding, multi-modalism or resources to redress impacts on communities from previous transportation investments, most of which are still largely reflected in current law, I want to focus on what mayors believe was the law's key feature and that is its commitment to local decision-making and planning – at the metropolitan and regional level – whereby city, county and other local government leaders join together to plan and decide collectively how federal funds are invested, subject to fiscally-constrained investment plans. Three decades later, these features of ISTEA continue to define much of the FAST Act law before us today.

It is particularly noteworthy for me that during the formulation of ISTEA, the nation's local and regional governmental organizations, including The United States Conference of Mayors, came together around several principles, called the "Denver Accords." The core principle of this strategic agreement was increased metropolitan/regional decision-making and planning as an appropriate federal policy response as we neared completion of the Interstate Highway System.

Notably, the ISTEA law envisioned that in future years more decision-making and funding would be devolved further to local officials, who in concert with their local counterparts on a regional basis, would have more say and input over time on how available federal dollars were invested. Since 1991, largely at the urging of state DOT officials, key industry interests and some governors, further devolution of these programs and federal highway resources to local leaders and local areas were halted and, in some cases, ISTEA-enacted commitments were weakened or overturned.

Mr. Chairman, we believe that COVID-19 and its impact on the transportation sector can spark a shift in transportation policy never seen since the initial completion of the Interstate System. As if the pandemic isn't enough to drive this redirection in policy, we now confront unprecedented climatic events and growing focus on historical inequalities, fueled in part by past transportation investment practices. Denver still experiences separated and disconnected communities resulting from the history of railroads expansion, interstate highways and other infrastructure that divided neighborhoods. In addition, the history of "redlining" entrenched housing policies that confined minority and low-income populations adjacent to industrial areas and infrastructure with limited safety and environmental safeguards. Although these practices are decades old and no longer documented official policies, Denver and many other cities are currently grappling with how to fix poorly designed infrastructure, remove barriers, and reconnect communities to ensure efficient and safe access to jobs and amenities.

FAST Act Renewal, Infrastructure Investment and Fiscal Conditions

As I mentioned earlier, local fiscal conditions have eroded considerably due to the pandemic, a reality that we, as local leaders, urge you to reflect in your work on FAST Act renewal and infrastructure investment.

We urge you to rely on local leaders and to use the FAST Act renewal to reaffirm and expand your commitment to local empowerment. We will help deliver the key policy outcomes that are so desperately needed. That is why mayors throughout the nation have been calling on you and others in Congress to <u>significantly</u> raise existing funding commitments to FAST Act Renewal and to infrastructure more broadly. We see this policy direction as vital to the economic recovery we need and the outcomes we are discussing here today.

In addition to increased funding, there are specific policy changes – some modest and others more significant – that could help us locally accelerate the work we have already started, and "Build Back Better" as we move toward a post-pandemic world. Let me first talk about FAST Act renewal.

Our top priority is the allocation of all Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) resources to local areas – specifically, by raising the "local share" from 55 percent to 100 percent (while preserving current law set aside for Off-System bridges).

When Louisville Mayor Greg Fischer appeared before you in June, testifying on these same issues as President of The United State Conference of Mayors, he said, "Mayors know our cities will be changed by this pandemic, as it realigns our business sectors and workforces as well as local government services. COVID-19 is forcing change on a massive scale and at a very rapid pace, challenging our public, private and non-profit institutions like never before. And, it has brought unprecedented disruption to our transportation networks and services, forcing this Committee to reexamine and revisit its FAST Act renewal proposals."

His assessment then has proved to be quite prescient in describing the scale of the challenges we face, and at that hearing he also urged shifting STBG funding to local areas as a response to these changes. I strongly agree with Mayor Fischer's assessment and urge you to embrace this expanded commitment to STBG local area funding as a solution for the times before us, adding only that now it is a foregone conclusion that more of these COVID-induced changes will not only be enduring but, in some cases, permanent.

Among mayors, we have talked about COVID-induced changes – and we are witnessing a remarkably high share of U.S. workers now telecommuting, at levels past estimates predicted were not even possible. This trend alone could reshape our commute patterns, "flattening this curve" during peak commute periods and potentially create new demand for different types of trips throughout a day.

Almost daily we see reports about the relocation of the nation's workforce, a new paradigm where thousands of workers are exiting higher-priced metro markets for others; within markets, thousands are relocating as well, seeking a home and an office simultaneously. In addition to disruptions in the residential housing markets, commercial real estate markets, especially in larger cities, have been roiled by the pandemic, with many building owners looking to a future where commercial office space may soon be converted to housing or other uses.

In this new era, the street in front of your house – AND now increasingly also your new workplace – is almost always a city- or county-owned or maintained street, a key part of our national transportation infrastructure that has been mostly ignored or dismissed in the debate on federal transportation policy. And, it is also these local streets or "last mile" networks that are now absorbing the shift from storefronts to increased home deliveries; in other cases, it is streets in local commercial areas where so many small businesses have borne the brunt of this pandemic.

These new realities are where we need to turn our attention: direct additional resources. Rely on local leaders to sort out what all of this means for our transportation systems, for our economic recovery, for curtailing harmful emissions, and for equity. As we assess and confront these challenges, I don't believe that the answers will be found in our state capitals and in the nation's capital but, rather, locally where mayors and other local leaders work collectively to comprehend and address the transportation changes and other conditions before them, and "Build Back Better" together.

The Surface Transportation Block Grant – with this commitment to local area funding which is so flexible – is exactly the right program at this time to help local leaders address the myriad of needs before them and, when coupled with other policy changes and commitments, will make a difference in our national efforts to recover more fully and advance key priorities more quickly and effectively.

State DOTs, for their part, can continue to focus on the National Highway Performance Program which has always been their priority. To the extent states have a need for additional flexible funding that the STBG program now provides, they can generate those funds, as they have for many years, by using the flexibility the law grants to states to shift apportioned funds among other program categories.

It is neither reasonable to continue the “status quo” delivery of these resources, nor it is reasonable to assume or expect that State transportation departments have the capacity to comprehend and respond to the travel, housing, economic and other changes affecting our regions, our cities and our neighborhoods.

The reality before us is challenging, to say the least. As a mayor, I and others in local government struggle with it every day, working as best we can, in real time, to adjust and contemporize our city’s practices, policies and investments, knowing there are changes underway that are not yet fully understood. But, Mr. Chairman, I can assure you that local elected leaders, like myself, are more attuned and best positioned to respond to the current environment before us and help lead us forward during this most challenging period.

Mr. Chairman, let me mention climate, as one example, to show how an expanded STBG commitment is so important at this time. We all know that the expanded use of EVs is in our future, but this will require new infrastructure investment to support EV use on our Interstate (and on intercity highway) networks and on our local highway networks. States have a massive account – the National Highway Performance Program – that can fund EV infrastructure on our Interstates and on our principal arterials. Additional STBG resources to our MPOs will help accelerate the buildout of public and private EV infrastructure on local highway/street networks – where most people live and work.

But getting to a low or zero carbon future is about more than substituting EVs for gas-fueled vehicles. In Denver, expanding public transit, with a strong emphasis on Transit-Oriented Development, and non-auto travel options means fewer and shorter auto trips, reduced VMT overall and less carbon use, in the near term. In addition to FTA’s transit funds, STBG funding helps us deliver cost effective projects, relatively quickly, to expand mobility options in our TOD areas and other parts of the city. In addition to lower relative carbon use, lower per capita VMT means less-costly, highway infrastructure in the future. Notably, TOD projects benefit from the relative energy efficiency of multi-family compared to single family housing, reducing carbon use in the building sector. In my city, we are working to make these connections; added STBG will help us accelerate the infrastructure improvements to achieve these outcomes.

Finally, let me add some context for why empowering local officials in their local regions is so important and is an area of interest for the entire nation. Mr. Chairman, I know you are well familiar with metropolitan economies and their importance to national economic growth. Mayor Fischer in his testimony discussed the Louisville metropolitan area and its significance to his home state.

According to the most recent U.S. Metro Economies report, prepared for The United States Conference of Mayors by IHS Markit, the Denver metropolitan area economy accounted for an estimated 58 percent of the state's total economic output, with the region producing $213 billion in gross metropolitan product in 2020.

In FY'20, the FAST Act allocated STBG formula funds directly to these three metro areas – Boulder, Colorado Springs and Denver – totaling $51 million. Notably, these three metro areas, each with a population of more than 200,000 people, accounted for nearly three quarters (73 percent) of the state's economy. This relatively modest commitment represents only 8.5 percent of the state's $589 million in apportioned funding in FY'20. Our proposal on STBG funding to local areas would raise the metro share from 8.5 percent to 14.3 percent of the state's total share, in a state where local governments own nearly 88 percent of all road and street mileage.

Let me share a final comment on the role of metropolitan economies as we think about our economic recovery strategy. Prior to the pandemic, all of economic forecasters, including IHS Markit for the Conference of Mayors, indicated that metropolitan economies will account for an ever-higher share of U.S. economic output in the future. This means for the Denver region and others throughout the nation that how successfully we move people and goods in these metro areas – our effectiveness and our efficiencies – translate into dollars gained or lost. Our people everywhere, and our national economy, prosper accordingly. We are not saying "defund state DOTs" but rather invest more in the places that will disproportionately determine our future success.

I have discussed our STBG recommendation in some detail because mayors and other local officials are certain it is a change that can be especially impactful at this time. These funds not only have the greatest flexibility, but they will contribute the most to new ideas on transportation system enhancements and allow us to see transportation system improvements never seen for the last century. We cannot do what has to be done through the status quo.

Notably, our recommendation on STBG Local Area funding has no effect on the flow of apportioned highway program funds among the states, but rather it only affects the flow of funds within states.

Another recommendation is to adjust federal matching requirements to incentivize investment in the outcomes we are seeking. For example, waive federal matching requirement over the near term for targeted transportation investments, including those being discussed today (e.g., climate mitigation and resilience, equity and restorative infrastructure, innovation and recovery projects in neighborhood/places impacted disproportionately by coronavirus). Instead of a programmatic waiver, such as waiving CMAQ Program matching requirements as was done in the past, consider linking the matching waiver to specific outcomes – projects that advance equity, climate, innovation and economic recovery, especially impacted local areas and neighborhoods.

Instead of mandating actions (i.e., project selection), incentivize them with a 100 percent federal share for investments that address specific outcomes, keeping others at the historic 80/20 share. This would incentivize investment in certain desired outcomes, avoiding the vitriol associated with federal mandates and other command and control regimes.

Finally, on FAST renewal, a clear challenge before local governments, our regions and states is the need to modernize planning tools and data systems and to adjust and adapt existing investment plans (e.g., TIPS, STIPs and long-term plans) to a pandemic-altered world, which I have only briefly described in this testimony. While I don't have specific recommendations, I do know that raising metropolitan planning (PL) funds would be one recommendation, helping us at the regional level consider fully changes that have occurred and are occurring now at the local level, trying to bring real-time data to bear and help imagine a future that is possibly different than the one we have been planning for.

All of us are now struggling with how we sort through the "project pipeline" to make sure we are making the best choices at this moment in time. In effect, we need to "stress test" our planned project investments against various future scenarios. To illustrate with an example from the Washington, DC region, a report last week estimated that 60 percent of all area workers are now telecommuting, up from the pre-pandemic rate of 5 percent. The new law should find ways to help your state and local partners look for projects, going forward, that make sense under various scenarios – in this example, account for an uncertain share of these workers who may or may not return to the office.

Infrastructure Investment and Economic Recovery

The nation's mayors – through The U.S. Conference of Mayors – have developed an initial infrastructure agenda, calling on Congress to "localize" more of the available federal funding. I discussed one of these priorities – STBG Local Area Funding – as part of my comments on FAST Act renewal, the only issue squarely before this Committee. These are our priorities:

1. **Invest in Neighborhood infrastructure** – <u>by directing</u> more resources to HUD's Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG);

2. **Invest in Greener Energy infrastructure** – <u>by restarting</u> DOE's Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant Program (EECBG); and

3. **Invest in Local/Regional Transportation infrastructure** – <u>by allocating</u> all Surface Transportation Block Grant (STBG) funds to "local areas."

Mr. Chairman, I know this Committee is planning to advance water resources legislation early on in this Congress. Tomorrow, the Conference of Mayors is providing its recommendations to the House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Water Resources on this legislation. I am certain the Conference will be sharing these recommendations with you.

We all know that increased infrastructure investment is one of the most productive public investments we can make. We also know that the pandemic has wrought such economic upheaval that increased infrastructure investment of any kind is needed now and would be productive economically.

That said, I do want to return to the issue of fiscal relief that I discussed earlier in my testimony, and underscore why an increased federal financial commitment is so important at this particular time.

It is often overlooked but the fact is local governments – cities and counties – are the nation's largest single investor in the nation's infrastructure. Local financial commitments to airports, public transit and water infrastructure, as notable examples, have always surpassed financial commitments by the federal government and state governments.

Among the most important issues before this Committee is funding for highway infrastructure. As Mayor Fischer pointed out in his June testimony, local governments in recent years have far outpaced the federal government and state governments in growing new revenue commitments to highways. Local governments so outpaced its governmental partners that the "local government share" of ALL new governmental revenues for highways reached 34.1 percent in 2015, up from 28.6 percent in 2001, totaling almost $72 billion in 2015. The local share of new revenue commitments during this period increased 19 percent, as state commitments fell 5.4 percent and the federal commitment declined by 14.4 percent.

Sustaining our efforts is really what is at stake at this particular juncture. Local governments have been the overperformers over the last couple of decades. But as Mayor Fischer noted in his testimony, "Given the current economic outlook, especially the uncertainty about the status of local and state fiscal relief, cities and other local governments will be unable to grow their commitments at this rate. It is certain that total highway investment will contract, absent greater commitments in your renewal legislation." A strong fiscal relief element, as set forth in the pending rescue plan, as I discussed earlier, will be key to limiting the contraction in local government infrastructure commitments that is surely to result from the economic effects of the coronavirus.

Let me now shift my comments to specific concerns and issues in my city and how we are taking action to address specific issues before the Committee today.

Denver's Investment in Sustainable Infrastructure

Like no other economic shock we have previously experienced, COVID-19 immediately decimated city revenues. While previous economic downturns took place over months, COVID-19 impacted us in days. When schools, restaurants, hotels and businesses shuttered their doors, the city's largest revenue source, based on sales and use, largely ceased. Downtown Denver saw an immediate downturn, with retail sales falling up to 63 percent and hotel lodging down nearly 90 percent. At the same time, we had to increase city spending on social stability programs like unemployment, homelessness, eviction protection, temporary testing facilities and many more. But we did it. And we see the light ahead. Moreover, with decreased revenues and increased costs for social needs, our capital program suffered delays.

As far back as the Works Progress Administration in 1935 to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009, we have seen how infrastructure investment not only creates jobs, it has multiplier effects throughout the economy and infuses cash that increases spending. Such spending commitments are needed now to help small businesses and retail sectors.

Denver doesn't just have ready-to-go projects that were put on hold, we have JOB READY projects. As I noted earlier in my remarks, the Surface Transportation Block Gant Program is the fastest way to get transportation project dollars flowing to our region and cities to create jobs.

Infrastructure investment driven by additional STBG dollars into Denver has and will continue to leverage our workforce development programs to target our unemployed, focus on minority owned and small business participation and be the tide that raises all boats.

Denver will reconstruct our outdoor mall in the central business district which is served by a robust transit line with 39,000 riders daily. The project will not only revitalize our core economic engine, it will also create 1,843 jobs and have an overall economic impact of $4 billion of value add to the regional economy.

Denver is entering the final NEPA stages of its first new bus rapid transit service, along a corridor with high ridership ripe for revitalization. This new service is projected to double ridership by 2035 improve travel time for transit users by 15 minutes and improve access to 280,000 jobs and 50 schools in the service area.

A 2019 study by the National Institute of Building Sciences found that every $1 invested in hazard mitigation projects, such as elevating homes or removing homes at risk of flooding, reduces future costs by an average of $6. Denver recently finished a multi-million dollar flood and drainage way improvement that removed thousands of homes from a flood plain and created linear parks and trails in areas of our city that previously had no amenities.

I mention this project because it is an outstanding example of how Denver prioritizes hazard mitigation strategies and our infrastructure investments for equity. We assess individual neighborhoods for needs and help lift those up who need it most. For too long we have looked only at the infrastructure needs and not included the needs of the people that use them. I am proud to deliver equitable infrastructure in Denver.

As we deliver these critical projects, Denver also focuses on sustainability. Our building code has reduced the impact of new development and roadways on our environment. Last year Denver established a sustainability office and passed a voter approved sales tax to fund our efforts. We are under contract now to deliver one of the largest sewer heat recovery systems, which will supply heating and cooling to our new agri-business campus under construction right now.

Our local code also sets requirements to expand our capabilities to meet the increasing electric vehicle market. Charging stations across the city and specifically in locations where communities need better access to transportation along with electric car sharing is underway now.

Denver's Efforts to Address Coronavirus and Transportation

The pandemic in Denver, like so many cities, upended our transportation system, in ways that will be with us for years to come. And, notably, some changes have been positive – many of our neighborhoods and communities were very supportive of redesigning certain streets in favor of people walking, biking, dining, and going to local restaurants. Many businesses and organizations, including the city, managed a rapid shift to Work from Home, which by many accounts has led to increased employee satisfaction and productivity, while reducing commuter trips.

To provide additional clean mobility options during the pandemic, Denver expanded electric carshare service in under-resourced communities. Almost overnight, Denverites were imagining a very different way to get around, a different way to use our streets and public spaces. And yet, we're also grappling with the negative impacts. Loss of transit ridership, tremendous impacts to our local revenues, subsequent major cuts to service and staffing at our regional transit agency. The revenue impacts will be hard to recover from, and yet we'll need bold solutions, quickly, if we are to meet our ambitious goals for transportation, equity, and climate.

Our vision for Denver is bold. We strive for an equitable city of complete neighborhoods and networks, so that all Denverites can access their daily needs. We seek to build a more complete multimodal transportation system, with an emphasis on safety, moving people, and creating sustainable public places. We have goals to double the number of people walking, rolling, biking and taking transit by 2030, while reducing the number of trips people take alone in a car. We can encourage this shift through land use and infrastructure improvements that use our space more efficiently while expanding access. We also seek to align private development with transportation infrastructure to encourage walkable, bikeable, transit-friendly communities.

To meet our equity and climate goals, we need to make transit more reliable, more frequent and more convenient. We need to prioritize safety, particularly of our most vulnerable users – people walking or using a wheelchair and other mobility devices. And we'll need to ensure that Denver residents particularly in historically under-resourced areas benefit from investments made in our infrastructure.

We will also need to ensure that Denverites have convenient access to electrified mobility options, such as e-bikes, scooters, electric vehicles and electrified transit service. We need to increase access to electric vehicle charging so that it's convenient for all Denver residents. We also need to drive community awareness about electric options and help facilitate EV adoption while expanding electrified mobility services like carshare and rideshare.

Denver's Economic Recovery and Infrastructure Strategy

Denver's economic recovery plan dovetails with much of our climate action work, because this crisis has revealed the interconnection between economic vitality, environmental justice, and public health. Denver's efforts to bring people back to work will focus on infrastructure jobs, jobs that not only provide long-term career paths and family sustaining wages, but also provide healthy workplaces for employees, safe working conditions, and purposefully avoid negative environmental impacts.

Rebounding from the COVID-19 pandemic, the economic downturn it caused, and the racial justice inequities will be a tremendous challenge for cities and the United States. While there will be a need to invest and create new policies on multiple fronts, Denver believes investing in sustainable transportation and infrastructure can advance a more just, equitable, healthy and resilient city. We seek to invest in projects that support Denver's overarching goals of increasing mobility and safety while reducing congestion and fighting climate change. In this recovery and into the future, we are focused on delivering safe, efficient and equitable transportation improvements, which will help invest in the economic recovery of our city and region for coming years.

Denver's Climate Strategy

Denver has accepted the reality that the science is clear, and we must cut greenhouse gas emissions, setting a goal to cut our emissions in half by 2030, with the expectation that the dire consequences our communities are already suffering will only get worse.

We know that extreme weather events – most recently, the deep freeze in Texas or the dramatic wildfire season that obscured the skies in Denver for more than two months last year – are certain to become more frequent and more intense.

We also recognize that climate change affects black and brown communities more, representing another threat that makes existing inequities even worse.

When you look at transportation emissions specifically, we estimate that this sector accounts for more than 30 percent of Denver's annual greenhouse gas emissions and is the number one source of air pollution in Denver. And we know that major reductions in the short term are needed, and that every year we delay meaningful action will lead to even more business disruption, more property loss, and more death.

Not only can we prevent more harm, we believe we can harness the opportunities of climate action by investing in climate action. Create good jobs, clean our air and water, and improve quality of life in our communities.

In Denver, the people support bold climate action and want their government to do more and do it faster. As one example of this support, nearly 65 percent of Denver voters approved a sales tax increase, to raise up to $40 million per year just to create the Climate Protection Fund. Transportation investments that improve and electrify mobility are one key part of this new fund.

Our plans are focused particularly on infrastructure projects that will benefit communities that are most burdened by climate change impacts, including providing zero-emission mobility options for essential workers. These programs will improve people's lives by reducing exposure to dangerous co-pollutants that cause respiratory health impacts and they will make our communities far more resilient to the impacts of climate change.

At the same time, we recognize that the need for low-carbon mobility options and resilient infrastructure far outpaces the funding available at the local level. Mr. Chairman, I want to commend you and others on this Committee for taking a look at the link between transportation and climate and taking initial steps in the bipartisan legislation you considered in the last Congress. Like you, we recognize that transportation continues to be the heaviest polluting sector of the U.S. economy, with emissions slated to grow higher in future years.

Earlier in my testimony, I talked about the need to deliver all STBG funds to local areas, a change that will help Denver and other cities in the region invest in transportation solutions that deal with our transportation emissions. Although not an issue directly before this panel, another important policy and funding priority is public transit. I want to acknowledge and thank you for your your efforts to sustain our important public transit services and expansions through this difficult pandemic period, providing much needed transit funding support as part of the COVID relief packages.

The House version of the rescue plan includes additional resources – $30 billion in emergency relief – that is so vital at this time to our local efforts and those across the country to keep public transit operating and our local economies moving forward. When we look to the future and the climate challenge before us, we will need additional long-term investments in transit to keep our emissions low and in order to provide equitable transportation services.

Denver’s Vision Zero Strategy

As a “Vision Zero” city, Denver has committed to taking a bold approach to creating safer, better streets for people moving throughout our city. We focus on protecting our transportation system’s most vulnerable users and call upon our partners and the public for their support in eliminating traffic deaths and serious injuries and creating the safest roadway system possible. Our goal is to eliminate fatal and serious injury crashes in Denver by 2030. We know you are already considering how FAST Act renewal can help us accelerate our Vision Zero efforts in Denver and elsewhere.

Technology and Innovation

We all recognize that we are on the precipice of a transportation technology shift, and the shift is needed. As just noted in our Vision Zero strategy, there are simply too many injuries and deaths that occur in our transportation systems and networks.

Like other cities, we see the vast potential to use technology to prevent deaths and injury but doing so will require much more investment. In Denver, to inform these investments, we are gathering more and better data of where and how crashes occur.

We are currently investing in modifications to a state highway through the city. You can imagine that in the nearly 100 years since it was aligned and constructed, the businesses, people, and modes of traffic have changed significantly. Many of our major arterials are have been designed to accommodate as many cars as possible, leaving pedestrians and other modes behind. In addition, we have yet to provide the enhanced mobility that transit systems need to be successful. Denver is working with others, including our state department of transportation, to change that.

Denver's Equity Lens and Investment Practices

Denver has established equity as our north star, and this has changed how every agency delivers its services and develops new policies and programs. Like most local governments, we know where the challenges are, but we are using data to pinpoint not only the problems, but also to identify solutions and measure our progress.

Our climate office, planning department, public health, parks, and emergency management are all working together to account for climate change in our hazard mitigation plan, maps on health disparity, access to green space, energy cost burden, and many more indicators and then, most importantly, will work with the impacted communities to implement solutions that they believe will serve their residents best.

Equity is a critical consideration for our transportation system as well. While improving transportation will have tremendously positive impact on all our residents, expanding clean, affordable transportation options will be transformative for our must vulnerable.

People who work multiple jobs, people who cannot afford the high expense of personal car ownership, older residents or people with disabilities who cannot drive, people who live in our most polluted zip codes – these people will benefit the most by a shift to a robust multimodal transportation system. In fact, we cannot have an equitable Denver, nor can we address the climate crisis, without reimagining transportation.

As a city and as a nation, we should recognize the harm inflicted on our communities – particularly communities of color and immigrants – to build the transportation system we have today. Recognizing that history, and the continued impact of transportation pollution in our neighborhoods, our transportation system of the future must do better. It must be cleaner, healthier, safer, more efficient and accessible for all.

Denver's Transformative Projects

Investment in transformational infrastructure is a priority for the city, especially if we hope to achieve the transportation mode shift, air quality conformance, environmental restoration and natural disaster protection as well as supporting job creation, economic recovery and development, among other goals we have identified.

Our city has been seeking partnerships and funding to deliver major capital projects that will transform our city while infusing vital resources into the national economy. A keystone project of ours is Bus Rapid Transit on Colfax Avenue. Building on years of study, planning and significant community input, we are now completing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) process and preliminary design for the project. We plan to leverage bond funding, which the voters passed in 2017, and seek additional grants to achieve the full vision of East Colfax BRT. This project will significantly shift people from vehicles by improving transit travel times, reliability and convenience. By our estimates, we could double ridership on the corridor by 2035, from 22,000 up to 50,000 daily riders. Travel times during peak hours could be 15 minutes shorter – an improvement that particularly improves the lives of our lowest-income residents who depend on transit to meet their needs. Overall, this BRT project will improve access to 280,000 jobs and nearly 50 schools along and near Colfax Avenue.

As Denver continues to grow and our mobility needs mount, it is time once again to make vast improvements in how we move people, goods and services, and how we remain connected to one another, to the region and to the world. Our very future depends on a renewed commitment to create, operate and maintain a safe, equitable, zero-emission and cost-effective transportation system.

Closing

Earlier this month, Mr. Chairman, you and a bipartisan group of Senators met with President Biden and Vice President Harris to talk about the need to invest in infrastructure, with renewal of the FAST Act a key piece of this effort.

After that meeting, you said: “By holding this bipartisan meeting today, President Biden made it clear that investing in our transportation is a top priority. The American people desperately want us to bring our roads, trains, and bridges out of the last century and into the future. And President Biden and I know that we need to do that in a way that builds back better, putting our transportation sector on a path to zero emissions and creating millions of good-paying jobs in the process.” You also said, “Reauthorizing our surface transportation programs is how we make this happen. A surface transportation reauthorization bill can reduce greenhouse gas emissions, create jobs to strengthen our economy, and move us to a cleaner, safer future.”

Mr. Chairman, we couldn’t agree more with your statement. Please know that I – and I speak for so many other mayors – stand ready to help you advance legislation renewing the nation’s surface transportation law and other legislation raising our investments in the nation’s infrastructure.

Again, I want to express my appreciation for this opportunity to testify before this Committee, and I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have.