

U.S. Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works

Statement of Senator Barbara Boxer San Diego Transportation Briefing November 14, 2008

Thank you, everyone, for joining my staff to discuss the next authorization of the Federal highway, transit, and highway safety programs. My staff will be reporting back to me on what they learn today. I will also add your statements to the record we will consider as we move forward in the legislative process.

We are facing tremendous challenges as a nation. The financial meltdown is threatening America's economic security. Millions of Americans have lost their homes to foreclosures or their jobs to the economic downturn.

At the same time, the bridges, highways and other critical infrastructure that we need to keep our economy moving are in need of investment. Collapsing bridges, crumbling highways, and failing levees have all been in the headlines recently.

These challenges represent real opportunities, not just to rebuild America's infrastructure, but also to jumpstart our economy. Rebuilding our economy will be a central goal of the next Congress.

And my Committee, the Committee on Environment and Public Works, will be well positioned to play a role in that effort because of our responsibility for many different aspects of our nation's infrastructure.

One example is the authorization of the Federal highway, transit and highway safety programs bill which will expire on September 30, 2009. As Chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, I am leading the effort to develop new legislation.

This legislation will impact all Americans because it sets the policy and provides funding for transportation nationwide.

My Committee has already begun the authorization process by holding several hearings in Washington, D.C. and in California. We will continue to hold hearings, meetings, and listening sessions next year to make sure all points of view are considered.

My staff is in San Diego today to hear from Californians about their priorities so that I can incorporate them into the legislation. We will keep the record open for two weeks following this briefing so that those who are not testifying can submit their written testimony.

I have been working with the leadership of the Environment and Public Works Committee, what we refer to as “the Big Four,” to develop a set of principles for the next bill.

These principles include items such as: the efficient movement of people and goods, safety, and reducing congestion and its impacts.

These principals are incorporated into my title for the bill “MAP 21” (Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century).

One of my primary goals for this bill is to improve air quality and goods movement, both of which are critical to improving the quality of life and flow of commerce in California and across the Nation.

Nowhere is the need to improve goods movement more clear than in California. For example, 45% of all containerized cargo destined for the continental U.S. passes through California’s ports.

The high volume of cargo truck traffic has a huge impact on roads and communities in California and it is increasing. Freight handled by trucks is projected to double by 2035. Traffic through West Coast ports alone could nearly triple over the same period.

Not only does congestion cost time and money due to delays, it is a major contributor to increased transportation related emissions.

The movement of goods has a real impact on air quality and global warming as freight transportation is still largely driven by fossil fuel combustion. With that combustion comes emission of greenhouse gases, carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide, and particulate matter.

According to the California Air Resources Board (CARB), approximately 75 percent of diesel particulate emissions in California are related to goods movement.

CARB estimates that diesel emissions contribute to approximately 2,000 premature deaths each year and that the health costs of diesel emissions are billions of dollars each year.

Reducing congestion can improve air quality and public health. But, at the same time we need to reduce congestion, our population is growing and placing new and greater demands on the existing transportation systems.

According to the Census Bureau, by the middle of the Century, the Nation will have grown to 420 million people from the 300 million mark hit in 2007. This equates to 11 new Los Angeles metropolitan areas and a population increase of 50 percent in 50 years nationwide.

In addition to addressing congestion and improving our transportation systems, the public works projects included in the next highway, transit and highway safety programs authorization will create good jobs and stimulate our economy.

According to the Federal Highway Administration, every \$1 billion in Federal funding invested in transportation supports approximately 35,000 U.S. jobs.

This is exactly the kind of investment we need—investments that in the short-term create jobs here in the U.S. and in the long-term enhance the productivity of businesses and individuals.

Another challenge that must be addressed in the next bill is that the Highway Trust Fund, which funds the legislation primarily through gas tax receipts, is running out of funds.

In September, Congress passed and President Bush signed into law legislation that transferred \$8 billion from the U.S. Treasury to the Highway Trust Fund to ensure that states would continue to be reimbursed by the Federal government in a timely fashion for transportation projects underway in 2008 and 2009. Without this infusion of cash, states would have had to cancel or postpone scheduled transportation projects until additional funding could be made available.

The tragic bridge collapse in Minneapolis demonstrated the need to increase spending on infrastructure, not decrease it. The financing discussion will be a key element of the next bill.

We have great challenges before us. It's time to start rebuilding America. Investing in our transportation infrastructure helps America compete in the global economy and maintain our quality of life. It is that basic.

At the end of the day it's a matter of setting the right priorities and crafting innovative and effective means to address them. The next highway, transit and highway safety authorization provides an opportunity to take a fresh look at these programs and make the changes necessary to ensure our transportation system will meet the Nation's needs in the coming years.

I look forward to your suggestions and to working with you in the year ahead.

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