Opening Statement of Ranking Member Whitehouse
Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Hearing: "Constructing the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Bill: Stakeholders' Perspectives."
July 16, 2025

Thank you, Chair Capito for this hearing, and thank you to our three witnesses for testifying today.

As we consider the next surface transportation reauthorization bill, I would be remiss not to begin by reminding everyone that Democrats will have no reason to do a bill if we have an administration that will not faithfully execute the law.

Over the last few months, DOT has made substantial progress obligating money to hundreds of previously-frozen grants. New draft guidance for the National Electric Vehicle Infrastructure program was submitted to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs, albeit more slowly than I had been led to believe it would be. This is progress. But NEVI is still stalled at OIRA, and periodic threats continue to politically disfavored projects, like high speed rail and congestion pricing.

I want to get a bill done, and I have given my team the green light to work on its details. DOT is moving in the right direction, particularly when compared to the dumpster fire of political corruption at the Environmental Protection Agency.

Here in Congress, there is bipartisan agreement about a strong federal commitment to our infrastructure.

The American Society of Civil Engineers still gives our roads a D+. We have more than 43,000 bridges still classified as structurally deficient. 39 percent of our public roads are in poor or mediocre condition. Close to 40,000 people still die each year on our roadways, in the wealthiest country in the world.

Our directive is clear: work together to build on the early successes of the IIJA and further improve our transportation infrastructure. As we do this, prudent investments must account for anticipated conditions.

Annual costs for climate-related damage to road and rail infrastructure is expected to reach nearly $20 billion a year by 2050 with approximately $1.5 billion in costs for bridges alone. A recent report by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and Allstate found that for every $1 invested in infrastructure resilience , communities across the country save $13 in post-disaster losses and economic savings.

I thank DOT for finalizing the PROTECT grant agreement for the Mt. Hope Bridge in Rhode Island just last week. The PROTECT program recognizes that climate change is a real driver of infrastructure risk, and investments in resilience now will save money in the long run.

Pollution-driven climate change is costing lives and livelihoods. To pretend otherwise is to abdicate our moral and fiscal responsibility. The next reauthorization bill must and will take climate change seriously.

Transportation is the largest source of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions: 1.8 billion metric tons of carbon dioxide into our atmosphere each year—more than a quarter of total U.S. emissions.

Just last week, four communities were ravaged by 1-in-1,000-year rainfall events. Climate change is making floods like those in Texas, North Carolina, New Mexico, and Illinois more intense, more deadly, and more frequent.

Our transportation system is driving climate upheaval, and that, in turn, challenges the functionality of our transportation networks.

In addition to climate safety, the next reauthorization bill must prioritize roadway safety. The persistently high number of traffic fatalities, and their immeasurable pain and suffering, is unacceptable.

This is not just driver and passenger safety, but the safety of those walking, biking, and working on construction sites or responding to emergencies. Many of our roads that are in poor condition are the local roads that carry a large share of our vehicle miles traveled, exacerbating the safety risks.

As we put pen to paper on this next transportation package, let us be clear-eyed. Let us follow the evidence. Let us make the investments in our transportation systems that reduce emissions, that prioritize safety, that bolster resilience, and that meet the real-life needs of the communities we serve.

With that, I look forward to hearing the perspectives of our witnesses.