Written Testimony of the Transportation for America Coalition
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Respectfully submitted to members of the U.S. Senate Committee on the Environment and Public Works

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The members of the Transportation for America Coalition would like to thank the Committee on the Environment and Public Works for holding this hearing on the transportation challenges currently facing rural America. Functional, safe, and efficient transportation systems for all Americans are one of the cornerstones upon which this country was built. Now, the future of America's economic growth, its future energy security and the health of its citizens depend on our ability to affordably connect people with jobs, education, healthcare, and their families.

The unique transportation needs of small town and rural Americans are clear: longer distances between job opportunities, volatile energy prices, and shifting demographics are all impacting the continued prosperity of these communities. While these are similar challenges facing metropolitan areas, many small towns and rural areas lack the financial resources, planning capacity, or the authority to implement local priorities that may not always align with those at the state level. A bold new policy is needed to reform federal investments in the transportation system in a way that particularly benefits the residents of rural and small town areas by ensuring adequate investment to maintain existing infrastructure, facilitate economic growth, and provide affordable mobility options.

Recognizing the need for discussion and consensus around these issues, the Transportation for America Campaign hosted a series of roundtable discussions, meetings, and briefings throughout 2009 and into 2010 to bring together transportation practitioners, nonprofit advocates, service providers, and elected officials interested in improving accessibility in rural America. This working group identified barriers to accessibility in non-metropolitan areas, and prepared six principles for reform to address these challenges. These ideas are summarized in the "Principles for Improving Transportation Options in Rural and Small Town Communities" white paper being released today by Transportation for America, and included as an appendix to my written testimony. I would like to highlight each of these six principles for the Committee to consider as you work to re-authorize the federal surface transportation program.

1. Empower Local Communities through Institutional Reforms

The residents and leaders of non-metropolitan counties, small towns, and rural communities have responsibility for key elements of the transportation system that connect their towns with other areas. Residents and leaders in rural regions also better understand their community's transportation needs and general challenges and should be ***part of the decision-making process*** when transportation projects are planned, selected, and constructed in their area.

The current process for soliciting input from rural stakeholders does not adequately consider the impact of transportation projects on economic development, housing, health, and livability; nor are the local priorities of small towns and rural stakeholders always reflected in the priorities of the state DOTs or neighboring MPOs. Therefore, we support institutional reforms that establish and fund Regional Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs) and increase the level of coordination between states, Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs), and local areas.

T4America's recommendations would allow rural residents to identify a barrier to progress in their community and come up with a transportation solution to address that challenge. We want to ***empower rural residents*** to make decisions that greatly affect their own communities.

2. Improve Transportation System Conditions and Safety

The poor condition of many of our roads and bridges is only getting worse, threatening lives and the economy. Today, the average age of America's bridges is 43 years and while there are more than 450,000 rural bridges, almost half of the bridges more than 20 feet long are structurally deficient.[i] A main focus of the Surface Transportation Authorization Act (STAA) debated in June 2009 is to ensure state transportation agencies have the resources to repair and rehabilitate existing highways, roads, streets and bridges by offering new programs like the Critical Assets Investment (CAI) program. The federal transportation program must ensure adequate funding is dedicated to maintain and preserve bridges, roads, and transit systems, particularly in rural areas, which constitute about 3.1 million of the 3.9 million miles of public roads, carrying about 40 percent of the total volume.[ii]

Communities across America require a renewed focus on improving the safety of all travelers on rural roads, including drivers, transit passengers, pedestrians, and cyclists. Indeed, 58 percent of highway fatalities occur on rural roads, a rate twice that of urban roads.[iii] The federal transportation program should recognize the opportunity to use highway design solutions that recognize the safety and mobility needs of all transportation users and target funding to improve data collection to address recognized safety issues.

Federal funds should provide states with the flexibility to use rural Interstate Highway corridor rights-of-way for the deployment of fiber optic cable and/or wireless communication infrastructure, across multiple States linked by the Interstate Highway system. Section 5507 of the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) directed USDOT to assess the feasibility of installing broadband technology along rural highways to improve rural communication connectivity. The Rural Interstate Corridor Communications Study explored the feasibility of this approach and was submitted to Congress on August 18, 2008. The Report to States, submitted to Congress in February 2009 provides a summary of resources available to the States to begin deployment of high-speed telecommunications.

3. Invest in Public Transportation and Intercity Connectivity

Demand for increasing transportation options is growing in our non-metropolitan regions: between 2002 and 2005, ridership on small urban and rural public transportation systems jumped nearly 20 percent.[iv] Energy-efficient ***public transportation services and long-distance passenger services connect rural communities*** with nearby airports, transportation centers, and major metropolitan areas and contribute to regional economic growth. The aging population found in many small rural towns is increasingly reliant on local transit providers. Demand responsive service is critical to those who have no other options to see the doctor, go to the grocery store or other critical needs. Yet despite these benefits, nearly 40% of all rural residents live in communities with no public transportation.[v]

Recent research has shown that rural and small metropolitan transit services offer measurable economic benefits. In one study, rural counties with transit service were found to have 11 percent greater average net earnings growth over counties without transit, and the estimated annual impact of rural public transportation on the national economy was over $1.2 billion.[vi] The federal program should fund investments to expand capacity, improve safety, achieve reasonable service levels, and integrate the operations of passenger transportation services in to benefit those who live in rural and small metropolitan areas in the United States.

4. Preserve and Create Livable Communities

For the more than 1.6 million rural households that do not have access to a car,[vii] getting to jobs, healthcare, education, and family can be a burden on family budgets and time. Indeed, across America, households in the lowest 20 percent income bracket spend about 42 percent of their annual income on transportation.[viii] This burden is especially compounded during periods of high-energy prices, since residents of rural areas who do have vehicles drive about 17 percent more miles each year than urban residents.

Improving local economic competitiveness by prioritizing investments that revitalize downtowns and local businesses, while increasing the value of land surrounding well-planned transportation projects offers the potential to reverse sprawling development patterns that have damaged the historic character and heritage of many small towns. I've seen this happen firsthand in Meridian. It is only through investing in our downtown and building a transportation hub, which resulted in bolstering the local economy, that we were able to reverse this decline and renovate our historic buildings. The federal transportation program must ***focus resources on strengthening and preserving rural town centers to revitalize and enhance the economic competitiveness of existing communities.*** These investments can help reverse the economic decline that many rural areas are experiencing. This is precisely what makes a sustainable community, and our rural areas have just as much need and opportunity to invest in livability initiatives as metropolitan regions.

5. Investment in Intercity Transportation Networks

Passenger transportation, including public transit, passenger rail, commercial air service and intercity bus, is key to mobility in rural areas. Intercity bus is especially crucial to providing services for communities in which air or passenger rail options are not readily available or

affordable. Regional and intercity travel is currently met through interstate travel. The only supplier of passenger rail service is Amtrak, serving approximately 180 destinations in non-metropolitan communities. **Expanding the funding and eligibility of intercity transportation facilities and service should be pursued in the next surface transportation bill.** Investments in high-speed rail should serve travel needs of urban and rural centers.

Using federal transportation investments as a catalyst to enhance a community's sense of place and quality of life, should ***recognize the importance of town transportation hubs***, such as historic train stations, to serve as a physical place for public transportation modes and service providers to integrate services, as well as serving as active catalysts for economic growth in the communities where they are located. Rail stations have the proven ability to revive small town downtown areas, to knit a community together, and to stimulate housing, business, and retail development. This was certainly the case in Meridian, Mississippi a town of 40,000, where I had the privilege to serve as mayor for 16 years. Our decision to invest in the revitalization of our historic train station as a multimodal center proved to be a catalyst for transforming our main street, increasing public transportation ridership, and helping to generate millions of dollars in private economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods.

6. Renew Focus on Goods Movement

The movement of goods and freight by all transportation modes through rural areas is increasing and this trend is expected to continue in the foreseeable future. Between 1990-2001 freight transportation on major railroads increased by almost 45 percent. Yet during the same period, rail system mileage decreased by 18% and the agriculture sector, a backbone of many rural economies was among the industries most hurt by disruptions.[ix] Growth in long-distance goods movement through rural areas presents a challenge to maintaining local highways, increasing traffic and truck safety concerns, and consolidation or abandonment of manufacturing, processing, and agricultural centers resulting from the closure of many branch lines cutting off rail service to many rural areas.

Multi-modal freight solutions are required to ensure rural economies, as well as the U.S. economy, continue to be competitive in the 21st century global economy. National, state, and local freight planning, modeling, and forecasting can help determine when to upgrade current infrastructure, where new facilities and infrastructure should be located, and which factors influence the transportation decisions of private companies. Railroads, including over 500 small, locally owned companies, move 40 percent of the nation's total intercity freight (measured in ton-miles), 65 percent of the nation's coal, and 40 percent of the nation's grain and farm products.

Providing state and local governments the flexibility to invest in multimodal infrastructure, such as rail, intermodal transfer points, and inland waterways, is critical to controlling freight costs as well as the final price of the product, since transportation costs range from 1 to 14 percent of consumer prices, depending on the commodity and the distance moved.[x] At the federal level, US DOT should ***identify investments of national priority***, focusing on multimodal intercity corridors of national significance, including a

national intercity rail network and key freight corridors co-located where possible with electricity infrastructure.

Conclusion

A safe, strong, and efficient transportation system serves as the backbone of our nation, growing the economy and providing access to the American dream. Connecting our cities, counties, and regions remains critically important in rural areas and small towns across America, where inadequate and outdated infrastructure is hurting families, limiting economic development, threatening health, and restricting the creation of good jobs. These pressing challenges require innovative new solutions to improve mobility in small towns and rural areas.

No two rural areas are alike and defining the typical small town is impossible because of variations in cultural, geographic, and economic conditions that make each area unique. Rural is an inexact term with changing meanings in different contexts. For example, what is considered rural in a state with low population density, like Montana or Mississippi, may not resemble what is considered rural in a state with much higher densities, like Massachusetts or California.

I appreciate the Committee's focus today on the unique needs of our smaller towns and rural areas. The current federal transportation program does fall short in terms of meeting the needs of these communities. Reforms are needed to make transportation work better in our large and small urban areas. For rural America, these include a greater focus on preserving our rural towns and Main Streets, meeting the mobility needs of all rural citizens, including the growing numbers of elderly, building planning capacity in rural regions and urban centers, and increased investments in freight and intercity passenger transportation that connect rural and urban centers and ensure our future economic competitiveness.

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[i] Federal Highway Administration. (2004) "Planning for Transportation in Rural Areas." U.S. Department of Transportation. Washington, D.C. www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/rural/planningfortrans/index.html

[ii] Federal Highway Administration. (2004) "Planning for Transportation in Rural Areas." U.S. Department of Transportation. Washington, D.C. www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/rural/planningfortrans/index.html

[iii] National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS), 2007. http://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/local_rural/rural_fatal.cfm

[iv] American Public Transportation Association (APTA). *Facts on Public Transportation*. Available at: http://www.apta.com/media/facts.cfm

[v] Rural Assistance Center

[vi] Transportation Research Board. (1997). *Assessment of the Economic Impacts of Rural Public Transportation*, Transit Cooperative Research Program Report 34, p. S-2

[vii] U.S. Bureau of the Census. 2000 Census. "U.S. Population Projections for Selected Age Groups: 2005-2030"

[viii] The Bureau of Transportation Statistics, Consumer Expenditure Survey, Transportation Statistics Annual Report, (2000), www.bts.gov.

[ix] US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service. (2005). "Rural Transportation at a Glance"

[x] Federal Highway Administration. (2002) "Benefit-Cost Analysis of Freight Investments," *Freight News*. U.S. Department of Transportation. Washington, D.C.