"This is a good hearing and a good day to discuss the road ahead for us. We're going to discuss proposals to improve America's transportation infrastructure. It's an important conversation, on the EPW Committee, we've already begun to work to craft surface transportation reauthorization legislation for next year.

"Senator Alsobrooks and I were just visiting about how the last one passed out of the committee unanimously. Beginning work early, working together, having good witnesses helps us get to a similar goal next year.

"I commend Chairman Capito for her leadership in getting the reauthorization process started early and look forward to working with her, Ranking Member Whitehouse, Ranking Member Alsobrooks, and of course my fellow committee members to get a comprehensive, bipartisan bill across the finish line next year.

"I also want to thank our witnesses today for being here. We appreciate your time and the insight that you bring to this conversation.

"As we look toward reauthorization, I'm focused on advancing practical, bipartisan policies to improve the efficiency and the effectiveness of the Federal Aid-highway program. Just last week, as I said, the full committee held an excellent hearing with state and local leaders, including Governor Kelly Armstrong where we talked about lessons learned in past bills and what improvements we can make. Some programs like the Bridge Formula program are a high priority for all states. Governor Armstrong spoke in strong support of it and it's no surprise that his Department of Transportation is echoing the same strong support in your testimony today.

"But there are areas where we can improve. In recent months, I've introduced three bills, which I believe are all central to this effort. Each reflects direct input from states and is about getting better outcomes, without increasing the cost to the taxpayers.

"From the start, however, I need to emphasize the importance of preserving and strengthening formula funding. As I like to say, without well-maintained routes like Interstate 94, which is made possible because of formula funding, durum wheat from North Dakota would never become pasta in New York or Los Angeles, and wouldn't that be too bad. North Dakota is low population state, but the number one producer of many agricultural commodities. Our roads can't be relegated to gravel and expect interstate commerce to thrive. The formula system works and this committee has demonstrated a strong commitment to it over the years.

"In terms of reforms, I think we need to take a serious look at reducing the regulatory burden on states and cutting red tape within the highway program. My bill with Senator Kelly, the Transportation Asset Management Simplification Act, does just that. It's a small fix but it supports a much bigger goal of cutting through the bureaucracy so that every dollar goes further.

"Another key principle is providing more flexibility for states to make investment decisions that better reflect local needs. Greater flexibilities for states is precisely the goal of the Highway Funding Transferability Improvement Act, which I was happy to partner with Ranking Member Alsobrooks on. It's a great idea and I'm glad we're working on it. Her forward-thinking approach on this issue is refreshing. The concept with our legislation is remarkably simple, a lot of good things are, but very important. States know their needs better than any bureaucrat in Washington. North Dakota and Maryland's constituents have very different transportation needs. It turns out, when Washington gets out of the way, states know exactly what to do and deliver real results. Both Ranking Member Alsobrooks and I served in state and local government, and I think both of us would agree, the best partnerships with the federal government were those where we could be the most nimble to meet a constituent's needs. I always tell federal witnesses and nominees: please, do not impose federal mediocrity on our state's excellence. This bill embodies that basic principle and I look forward to hearing from both our state witnesses on this point.

"Safety, however, must also be at the forefront of everything we do. Specifically, making it safer and easier for kids to walk and bike to school. I introduced the Safe Routes to School Improvement Act with Senator Markey to do just that. This builds on bipartisan work that we did with Senator Cortez Masto in the last highway bill that expanded the Safe Routes to School program to include high schools. This bill would enhance access to the program for communities in North Dakota and nationwide by requiring states to have a specific point of contact to help local communities navigate the program and understand what exactly they are eligible to apply for. This will improve infrastructure like sidewalks and street crossings so that children who walk or bike to school are safer in that process.

"Lastly, this committee must do more to accelerate project delivery. There is a lot to be said on this, but I'd just note the One Federal Decision (OFD) framework was a strong concept under the last bipartisan infrastructure bill, but it hasn't delivered the results we hoped for. As part of reauthorization, at minimum, we should revisit the OFD and make real improvements.

"I look forward to working with my colleagues to get this bill done and to ensure the highway program is more responsive to the needs of our constituents."