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OPENING STATEMENT TO THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS

Wednesday, July 29, 2009

Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Inhofe, distinguished members of the committee, I am honored to come before you today as President Obama's nominee for Assistant Secretary of Commerce for Economic Development. Over the past few days I had the opportunity to meet with several of you and members of your staff. I want to thank you for your wonderful hospitality. I enjoyed the visits and the insights shared regarding your home states.

Senators Lugar and Senator Bayh, I am very grateful for your kind remarks. Indiana is so fortunate to be represented by you. Throughout my years as Mayor, I could not have asked for better partners.

I want to thank President Obama and Secretary Locke for the tremendous trust they placed in me by this nomination. We all fully appreciate the enormous challenges we face as we work to restore America's economy, and I share their sense of urgency.

I would like to also say a special thank you to my family and friends who are here today. I especially want to introduce my wife Karen. She's been a terrific partner throughout my years of public service while also being an amazing mother to our children and a darn good attorney too.

Our children, Isabel and Ian, could not be here today. Hopefully, they're watching a webcast of today's hearing with their grandparents.

For over twenty years, I've been heavily involved in economic development. As an elected official, attorney, and businessman, I've been working to create jobs, attract community investments and improve the quality of life for our citizens. My extensive experience in the public and private sectors gives me a comprehensive understanding of how the federal government can play a meaningful role to help communities rebuild their economies and create a strong foundation for sustained economic growth.

While I've been the Mayor of Bloomington, Indiana and spent my professional life grounded there, my "roots" are firmly planted elsewhere.

I grew up in Kokomo, Indiana in a relatively typical middle class family. My father is a retired autoworker and my mother is a retired nurse. They still live in Kokomo as does one of my sisters, Anamaria, who is here today with her two daughters.

I'm a first-generation American. My parents came to this country to escape fascism. Their families arrived in America with little more than the hope for a better life. Through their sacrifices, they provided my generation with tremendous opportunities. They taught us the value of hard work and instilled in me a deep passion for public service.

Kokomo today is reeling from the collapse of our domestic auto industry. The most recent unemployment figure for the Kokomo region hit 19.7%. Home foreclosures have skyrocketed and families there are experiencing profound fear for their futures.

There are far too many "Kokomos" in nearly every state across America. Places like Merced, Toledo, St.Louis, Lincoln, and Hughes counties. We all know families in these communities – good people who have worked hard all their lives. Showed up on time. Performed their jobs well. Paid their taxes. Served in their churches and community organizations. And now, due to immense economic forces beyond their control, they're unemployed and struggle to not only make ends meet but to sustain hope.

It's my belief that the Economic Development Administration (EDA) is as well-positioned as any federal agency to provide the critical support these communities need to recover and create a stronger foundation for sustained economic growth. EDA has a long and accomplished history of doing such work. Often EDA's work has been quite and below the radar. Yet, in the communities, large and small, where this agency has performed, the impacts have been significant and lasting.
I was first introduced to the EDA during my first term as Mayor when RCA closed its Bloomington plant. 1200 jobs were lost along with our largest property taxpayer. RCA's decision left Bloomington with a 200-acre Brownfield site and over 2 million square feet of obsolete industrial buildings.

Our community pulled together and created an incredible public-private partnership. We successfully applied for an EDA grant to fund a new road that significantly enhanced access to this intercity site. This modest federal investment created the catalyst for transforming this obsolete industrial site into a thriving 21st century employment center. To date, the private sector has invested well over $200 million in capital improvements. We replaced over half the lost RCA jobs and restored stability in this area of the city. This is a classic example of the good works that EDA has been doing for over 40 years all across America.

These are truly challenging times for our country. I can't imagine a more important calling than to be engaged in our economic recovery efforts. I'm ready for this challenge. And if I'm fortunate enough to earn this committee's support and if I'm confirmed by the full Senate, I will work with you, your colleagues and the very dedicated staff at EDA to live up to this agency's mission – leading the federal economic development agenda, promoting innovation and preparing American communities for growth and success in our global economy.

Chairman Boxer, thank you again for the opportunity to address this Committee. I look forward to your questions.