

April 13, 2020

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker
U.S. House of Representatives
H-232, The Capitol
Washington DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader
United State Senate
S-230, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
H-204, The Capitol
Washington, D.C. 20515

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Minority Leader
United States Senate
S-221, The Capitol
Washington DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Majority Leader McConnell, Minority Leader McCarthy, and
Minority Leader Schumer:

We write because America's transportation system is in a crisis that more funding alone cannot fix. Despite billions spent every year, our roads, bridges, transit and rail systems are in disrepair, congestion has increased, pedestrian fatalities and emissions are the highest in decades and rising, and too many people lack safe, affordable, and convenient access to jobs and important services. The time has come to elevate the national conversation about transportation beyond the spending and distribution of funds. The next transportation authorization, whether included as part of an economic recovery package or as a standalone measure, must update our transportation program and focus on changes in the program to address these challenges.

Under President Eisenhower, our country developed the current transportation program to build interstate connections between cities. With the interstates now complete, and travel within communities the biggest challenge, the 70-year-old federal program continues to incentivize highway construction over all other investments and modes of travel. This has led to a significant maintenance backlog. It has also increased emissions and congestion while undermining the economic mobility and health of our communities, particularly for low-income people and people of color.

Reforming our nation's transportation system is necessary to reduce emissions that contribute to climate change and harm public health. Transportation is the single largest source of greenhouse gases (GHG), contributing 29 percent of the United States' total GHG emissions, with the majority of these emissions from driving. While electric vehicles (EVs) and vehicle efficiency standards are absolutely essential, they are sadly not sufficient to meet our emissions reduction goals. Neither will these technologies improve access to jobs and services for those who cannot afford a car, nor will they improve safety or reduce congestion. Providing safe and convenient ways for people to travel through

their communities using shorter or fewer car trips and other forms of transportation is essential to addressing these challenges.

To modernize our transportation system, Congress should make the following reforms:

Prioritize Maintenance: Cut the road, bridge, transit and rail maintenance backlog in half

The next authorization should cut the maintenance backlog in half by dedicating formula highway funds to maintenance. In addition, when building new road capacity, agencies should be required to create a plan for maintaining both the new road and the rest of their system. This is common sense and is already required when building new transit projects. Roads should not be treated differently. On the highway side, it will be important to organize the program to better support repair. On the transit and rail side, the programs are organized well in terms of addressing maintenance needs but need more resources. With this approach, the federal government can halve the current backlog in six years under current funding levels. If funding is increased, we can do more.

Design for safety over speed: Save lives with slower, safer road design

Access to safe, convenient transportation is a fundamental right. Today, most Americans are denied this right because their roads—not just highways—are designed to move vehicles at the highest speeds possible, and not for people walking, biking, or taking transit. High speeds make sense on interstates and other highways, but people die when we bring that design to streets that are supposed to connect people and create value. The federal program should require designs and approaches, including complete streets, that put safety first and slow speeds on local and arterial roads.

Roads surrounded by development and open to pedestrians should be designed to speeds that dramatically decrease the likelihood of fatalities in a crash (35mph or below). Creating safer communities will not only save lives, it makes walking, biking and riding transit a more viable and convenient option, providing people with affordable choices while reducing congestion and emissions.

Focus on improving access for people to jobs and services: Determine current connectivity and prioritize projects that will improve those connections.

The point of transportation is to get people where they need to go. Since the dawn of the modern highway era, we have used vehicle speed as a poor proxy for access to jobs and important services like healthcare, education, public services, and grocery stores. The way we build roads and design communities to achieve high vehicle speed often requires longer trips and makes shorter walking, bicycling, or transit trips unsafe, unpleasant, or impossible. New technologies can now help us measure success by the primary thing that matters to real people: the ease of arriving at your destination. Using this technology we can more accurately compare the costs and benefits of investment, and hold agencies accountable to deliver improved connections across all types of travel.

We can now consider access by driving, as well as walking, biking and transit. Studies have shown that communities with better access to jobs and services have greater economic mobility, and lower emissions from transportation because people have travel options, and do not need to drive as far, or at all, to get to jobs and other needs. Further, this data can help to address decades of disinvestment which have disconnected communities and worsened economic outcomes.

Congress should require USDOT to collect the data necessary to develop a national assessment of access to jobs and services and set national goals for improvement. With these data, state departments of transportation and planning organizations can ensure federal investments are effectively connecting people to economic opportunity. Funding should go to projects that will improve these connections, regardless of mode. State departments of transportation (DOTs) and metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs) should be held accountable by evaluating how well their investments help connect people to destinations.

Thank you for considering fundamental reform in the next authorization. We stand ready to assist in setting a new vision for the federal transportation program to address 21st Century challenges.

Sincerely,

Beth Osborne, Director
Transportation for America

and

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Forrest Dunbar, Chair
Anchorage Assembly

Genevieve Holubik, Architect
Anchorage AIA

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Darrell O'Quinn, City Councilor, District
5 & Transportation Committee Chair
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Adelene Jones, Mayor
City of Blue Lake

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Bike Fremont

Melissa Cunningham, Executive Director
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Virtuous Cycles

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Chester Foundation

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LivableStreets Alliance

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Kevin Reich, City Council Member
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Move Minnesota

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Greater Kansas City Chamber of
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Climate Reality Project, Charlotte
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Nevada

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David Foster, Chairman
RAIL Solution

Phil Irwin, VP
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City of Arlington

Cheryl Selby, Mayor
City of Olympia - Government

Claudia Balducci, Councilmember and
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King County Council

Robert Lawrence, Director
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Joyce Ellwanger, Secretary
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Barbara Richards, Conservation Chair
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Bonnie Margulis, Rabbi/Executive
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Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice

Nicholas DeMarsh, President
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