

Driving the Road to Recovery: Rebuilding America's Transportation Infrastructure

Testimony of John D. Porcari

Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation

March 24, 2021

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on this important topic. My name is John Porcari and I have had the opportunity to serve in the public and private sector in a variety of transportation and economic development positions, including the honor of serving as Deputy Secretary of the United States Department of Transportation and Secretary of the Maryland Department of Transportation.

At no time during my lifetime has transportation policy been more important to the future of our country, and indeed the planet, than it is today. If we are honest with ourselves, we are compelled to admit that many past transportation investment decisions have not resulted in a cleaner, safer, more equitable world.

We now face the urgent need to make immediate and profound changes throughout our transportation system if we are to ensure a better future for the next generation of Americans. A strong and compelling case is being made across the country and by my colleagues here today for increased investment across the transportation system. I would like to make the case for corresponding policy changes that would maximize the return on increased public infrastructure investments and rebuild our transportation infrastructure in a smarter, more resilient and sustainable way.

This fundamental change in direction is best described through two policy lenses: climate change and equity.

Climate change. Simply put, the transport sector is the largest single source of CO2 emissions in the United States, and must, therefore, be the single largest component of our response to the existential threat of climate change.

Equity. We have not paid adequate attention in the past to who benefits and who bears the burdens of our transportation investments. Equality of opportunity for all Americans should be a fundamental objective, not just the occasional happy by-product, of our investment choices.

For each of the policy recommendations below, I will briefly describe how they can directly address equity and climate change goals.

Electrification of our transportation system across land, sea and air should be our singular short-term imperative. For our Interstate highway system, several legal and policy changes

would accelerate these electrification efforts, including: modifying 23 USC Section 111 to explicitly permit charging facilities at rest areas and inductive charging in travel lanes; and commitment to both renewable power generation and long-distance transmission of renewable energy via buried High Voltage Direct Current (HVDC) lines in highway rights-of-way. Better stewardship of our public rights-of-way can greatly accelerate the generation and transmission of renewable energy. Similarly, early projects already underway utilizing private and public railroad rights-of-way for buried renewable energy HVDC transmission lines could be accelerated and scaled nationally through tax credits and incentives. These electrification efforts will also help to redress past inequities, in particular the disparate emissions impact on communities by diesel medium and heavy duty trucks, buses, and locomotives.

America's ports and intermodal freight transfer facilities, linchpins of our economy, need to be electrified as well. Cranes, rubber-tired gantries, drayage tractors and shore power for ships are all candidates for electrification and would benefit from a turbocharged **competitive grant program** that does not cap participation by freight projects. Airports would similarly benefit on the air side in the short term from electrification of tugs and ground handling equipment, and land side airport projects that provide electrified, portal to portal transit for passengers and employees. Increased investment in cleaner, more seamless goods movement across the transportation system is one of the most cost-effective investments we can make for future economic growth.

Building on America's existing **passenger rail** network will provide benefits to every part of the country. Amtrak long distance service provides crucial connectivity to rural communities. City pairs should be added to existing service in a building block fashion that will ultimately provide more of a national network, and promising private sector passenger rail proposals should be actively encouraged through the use of RRIF loans. Urgently needed improvements to the Northeast Corridor are a sound investment for a corridor with proven operating economics and strong growth potential. Likewise, Midwest and West coast passenger rail service has shown that infrastructure investments bring increased ridership. America's freight rail network is the envy of the world, and shared use of these rails can enhance both freight and passenger rail capacity, reducing our carbon footprint and providing mobility to underserved communities.

A surface transportation program that adopts a systems approach to moving people and goods safely and efficiently needs to specifically recognize and separately fund **projects of national significance** that are physically located in one state or region, yet provide crucial system-wide benefits. For example, the Brent Spence Bridge carrying I-75 over the Ohio River may be located in the greater Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky region, but it plays an outsized role in supporting the auto manufacturing ecosystem from Michigan to Georgia, carrying 3% of America's GDP annually over an outdated, substandard bridge. Projects such as the I-5 Columbia River multi-modal bridge, the Gateway passenger rail project in New York/New Jersey, as well as various coastal ports, inland waterway and Great Lakes cargo projects, play a

similar national function and should be treated as a separate category of nationally-critical projects.

Transportation projects requiring either an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) or an Environmental Assessment (EA) under the **National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA)** should now incorporate climate change and equity considerations in the development of the foundational Purpose & Need statements of those documents. This will bring mitigation and remediation of climate impacts, as well as specific equity considerations, into the project scope. **Active transportation alternatives** such as bike lanes, trails, and last-mile electrified mobility devices, including those for persons with disabilities, should be integral components of surface transportation projects. A re-engineered interagency NEPA process can have the twin benefits of both a streamlined process and better environmental and community outcomes. The resulting NEPA documents will also be less vulnerable to legal challenges.

The eligibility of USDOT's **TIFIA and RRIF loan programs** can also be broadened to encourage the construction of fleet charging facilities and acquisition of electrified rolling stock for transit systems, freight and commuter rail, school districts and municipal fleets. The use of Master Credit Agreements for electrification across asset classes by counties, cities and public authorities would help spur the concurrent electrification of multiple surface transportation systems. Electrified intermodal facilities for moving goods and people, particularly port/rail and air/transit, should be given expanded eligibility and expedited processing for these loan programs.

The genius of federalism as it applies to our transportation system is that project decisions are properly made at the local and state level based on local needs and priorities, and these projects aggregate into a national transportation system. USDOT should, in the words of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, encourage "**bold, persistent experimentation**" by local jurisdictions and states through more aggressive use of existing mechanisms such as the SEP-15 process and by funding higher risk/reward pilot projects through the competitive grant programs. Encouraging innovation in response to climate change and to redress the impacts of past project decisions should be central elements of our federal transportation program, and USDOT should strive wherever possible to assist local jurisdictions. This innovation agenda should also include connected/autonomous vehicles, safety and other technology innovations.

At the same time, these local project choices should be encouraged at the federal level to include **local employment and skills training** as an integral component of the project procurement. Multiple successful examples now exist of pilot programs that have squeezed more value out of infrastructure dollars by including a local hiring and training component that creates a ladder for good-paying middle class jobs. Similarly, a whole-of-government approach at the federal level including USDOT, DOE, Commerce and other agencies is required to maximize the **US manufacturing** opportunities for local infrastructure projects.

As we drive forward in rebuilding America's transportation infrastructure, it is worth remembering President Biden's vow to "Build Back Better". What does that mean?

"Build Back" is an acknowledgement that we have under-invested in our Nation's future, that we have to do much more if we are going to rebuild our economy and establish a stronger foundation for America's future. "Better" means we have to do it differently, explicitly taking into account climate change and equity as, together, we develop smarter ways to make foundational investments in a better American future through infrastructure.

The policy suggestions in my testimony today are intended to help us Build Back Better by maximizing the impact of every dollar invested and putting our nation on a glide path to a brighter, more sustainable future.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.