

Testimony of Don Graves
Nominee to be Deputy Secretary of Commerce
Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
March 10, 2021

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Committee, I am honored and humbled to be here today.

I want to begin by thanking President Biden for his faith and confidence in nominating me for the position of Deputy Secretary of the U.S. Department of Commerce. I also want to thank my family for their support, without which my career and this nomination would not have been possible.

My career, in government, the private sector, and nonprofits, has been dedicated to ensuring that economic opportunity is inclusive and broad-based, supporting working families and strengthening the communities in which they live. From my work in community development, to my time running the President's Jobs Council and the Cancer Moonshot initiative, my experiences took me to small towns in the Mississippi Delta, to the urban core in Milwaukee; from the colonias in Texas, to tribal communities in the Dakotas.

I have heard from manufacturing workers who have lost their jobs, parents struggling to educate their kids during the pandemic because they lack broadband access, and scientists tackling the pernicious impact of cancer, something far too many American households, including my own, have reckoned with.

For each of us who commit to public service, this is personal. I come from a long line of entrepreneurs and educators who worked hard to carve out a small piece of the American dream for their family and their community.

My personal and family history is tied closely to the Department of Commerce. It includes my four-times great grandparents who were former slaves but were able to build a successful horse and buggy taxi business here in Washington. The property they acquired for that business and their home, is today the site of the Commerce Department headquarters. Their son owned and operated the nation's premier hotel during the 1800s, mere blocks away. This first generation descendent of slaves went on to design a life-preserver for use on boats and ships that plied our nation's waterways, becoming one of the nation's first patent-holders of color through the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

I grew up between Cleveland, Ohio, on the banks of one of the world's greatest sources of freshwater, and the Maryland shore, where I enjoyed fishing and crabbing. I spent countless weekends with my grandmother in her farming community, running through the hills and woods in rural Ohio, where a special day could include a trip to the five and dime or the weekly quilting bee at the local church.

I witnessed firsthand one of the world's greatest environmental success stories: that of the Cuyahoga River, which went from being known as the river that burned to a travel destination and the site of the nation's best urban kayaking; a result of extensive local, state and federal partnerships that leveraged data and science to drive decision making and tourism investments.

Growing up and working in these different places, I've met Americans from all walks of life and geographies, pursuing dreams for themselves and their families. While there are important differences between them, including the challenges of systemic inequities, Americans by-and-large want the same thing. As President Biden has said, we all just want a fair shot.

But for far too many people, the promise of the American dream: to start and grow a business; to develop an idea into a product that can be sold all over the world; to work hard at a job that fulfills us and allows us to raise a family in relative comfort and stability, remains elusive. Too many Americans begin their journey without the tools or support necessary to get past the hoping and dreaming stage.

It is our duty to help provide the opportunity to turn those dreams into lives of dignity. We know that federal, tribal, state, territorial and local governments — their resources, data and research, and their most important assets, the experienced and capable civil servants who devote their lives to serving our nation — are critical to ensuring the American people and our economy can reach their full potential.

It is also our duty to ensure a level playing field for American workers and businesses as we compete around the world, that we invest in strong international partnerships to bolster our domestic economic growth. If confirmed, I will focus on recovering from the economic crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, protecting our critical infrastructure and our national security, and taking strong actions to ensure bad actors are held accountable for illegal and anti-competitive actions that hurt American companies and the American people.

If confirmed, I will put people and communities first. Data and science will always drive my decision making and I will rely on the deep expertise of the Department's career staff.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I look forward to your questions.

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