

**Testimony of Carol A. (“Annie”) Petsonk  
Assistant Secretary of Transportation  
for Aviation and International Affairs  
Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation  
Subcommittee on Tourism, Trade and Export Promotion  
June 13, 2023**

**“Oversight and Implementation of Travel and Tourism Legislation.”**

Chair Rosen, Ranking Member Budd, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me here today to talk about the Department of Transportation’s support of travel and tourism infrastructure and about our progress on the National Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan. Thank you also for your support of U.S. travel and tourism.

My name is Annie Petsonk. I am the Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs at the Department of Transportation. In addition to travel and tourism, my office carries a broad portfolio of responsibilities, including the economic regulatory aspects of domestic and international aviation, the Department’s engagement in international transportation and trade, and a range of other international cooperation and facilitation issues.

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law or BIL, makes historic investments in our nation’s infrastructure and competitiveness, with meaningful benefits for travel and tourism infrastructure across all 50 states, U.S. territories, and tribal communities. Across the country, we have already begun improvement on 3,700 bridges and almost 70,000 miles of roads and highways; and we have funded over 1,000 zero-emission buses and awarded over \$233 million in grants to improve and modernize vital intercity passenger rail service across the country. The FAA has also announced nearly \$2 billion in BIL funding that will go to 175 airports across the country to improve terminals of all sizes, expand capacity, and provide greater accessibility.

Fortunately, travel and tourism are on a path to recovery. Memorial Day weekend saw the highest volume of air passenger travel since any time before COVID, and cancellations remained under one-percent. We are also seeing increases in highway, bus, and train travel over last year as well as a 50 percent increase in cruise bookings over 2022. We fully recognize that some segments of the U.S. travel market have already recovered from the recent pandemic, while other market segments, such as business and international inbound travel, have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.

I come from a small town, Altoona, Pennsylvania, whose major tourist attractions, from the railroad’s world-famous Horseshoe Curve to our beautiful mountains and rivers, form a vital part of the warp and weft of our local economy. I have had the good fortune to spend magical time in National Parks and spectacular settings in each of the states that are represented on this subcommittee, including a great week in Las Vegas when my brother competed in the World Barbershop Harmony Society Championships. So, I know from personal experience the importance of tourism in connecting communities and driving thriving economies. That is why I am grateful for the opportunity to play a role in implementing aspects of the BIL that will help grow tourism in the United States.

The Department is a member of the Department of Commerce-led Tourism Policy Council, charged with leading the whole of government effort to ensure that the national interest in travel and tourism is fully considered in federal decision-making. And through our participation in the Tourism Policy Council, we supported the Department of Commerce's development of the 2022 National Travel and Tourism Strategy. I would particularly like to thank Chair Rosen for your leadership on the travel and tourism related provisions of the BIL including Section 25018 which requires the Department to update the National Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan.

Earlier this year, we established a department-wide Travel and Tourism Steering Committee. We also appointed the Director of the Office of International Transportation and Trade, a senior executive on my team, as DOT's Chief Travel and Tourism Officer. Her office is working closely with the DOT Travel and Tourism Steering Committee on the drafting of the National Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan. On June 2, 2023, the Department also published a Request for Comment, seeking to gather input on a variety of matters including data available to inform the Strategic Plan. Our goal is to complete the new National Travel and Tourism Infrastructure Strategic Plan as expeditiously as possible this year.

My office is also responsible for the economic side of aviation policy – both domestically and internationally. Our efforts are aimed at facilitating the substantial economic contributions that civil aviation makes to the US economy, including for tourism.

Domestically, the Essential Air Service Program and Small Community Air Service Development Program help connect smaller and rural communities in the United States to the national air transportation system, ensuring residents can pursue business and tourism opportunities through their hub airport or airports, have access to medical care and educational opportunities, and visit family and friends.

Internationally, my office is the primary arm within the Department of Transportation for the development of international aviation policy and implementation of the U.S. Open Skies policy in order to promote competition and create options for travelers, airlines, working people, and shippers while advancing strong labor standards here and abroad. We have over 130 Open Skies partners around the world and, in the last few months, have added Mongolia, Angola and Moldova to that number.

The Department of Transportation looks forward to continuing to work with the Subcommittee to ensure that America's travel and tourism sectors remain vibrant and valued. Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today.