

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND
TRANSPORTATION**

*Full Committee
Nomination Hearing
April 10, 2024*

DEMOCRATIC QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD
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COVER PAGE

SENATOR RAPHAEL WARNOCK (D-GA)

Port Traffic

On March 26, 2024, Baltimore's Francis Scott Key (Key) Bridge, located near the Port of Baltimore, collapsed after a cargo vessel struck a support beam.¹ Following the collapse of the Key Bridge, the Port of Baltimore indicated that vessel traffic in and out of the port would be suspended until further notice.² Early reports suggest the Port could reopen in May, but even a temporary closure is expected to create ripple effects at other key ports along the East Coast.³ As the nation's leader in roll-on, roll-off (Ro-Ro) automotive cargo traffic, the Port of Baltimore plays a key role in one of America's most important supply chains.⁴ The Port of Brunswick, Georgia, as the second largest Ro-Ro terminal in the country is expected to take on some additional capacity as cargo traffic is rerouted around Baltimore.⁵

1. When do you expect the NTSB's investigation to conclude and the Port of Baltimore to reopen?

The NTSB's safety investigation will take 12-24 months to complete. Oftentimes, the "what" of an accident is clear within weeks, but the "how" and "why" take time to uncover. This is a complex investigation. Additionally, some issues can impact our ability to complete investigations in a timely manner; for example, access to evidence. We need to make sure that any criminal investigation of the bridge strike and collapse is conducted separate and apart from our safety investigation and that we have timely access to all potential evidence. When the NTSB investigated the limousine crash in Schoharie, New York, that killed 20, we were prohibited from accessing the evidence for nearly 16 months, which substantially slowed our investigation.

With that said, we are still on scene, nearly one month later. Typically, we are on scene 7-10 days. In this case, it is taking longer as we test systems and components in the engine room which we believe are directly relevant to the power outage. We plan to issue a preliminary report with factual information (no analysis) within the next few weeks. If we believe there is a safety need, we will not hesitate to issue an urgent safety

¹ *Contact of Cargo Vessel Dali with Francis Scott Key Bridge and Subsequent Bridge Collapse*, National Transportation Safety Board (Mar. 27, 2024), <https://www.nts.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA24MM031.aspx>.

² Mark Thompson and Chris Isidore, *Cars, sugar, and cruises: How the Port of Baltimore closure could hurt the economy*, CNN (Mar. 27, 2024), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/03/26/business/baltimore-port-autos-cruises/index.html>.

³ Rebecca Falconer, *U.S. Army Corps plans to reopen Port of Baltimore channel by end of May*, Axios (Apr. 5, 2024), <https://www.axios.com/2024/04/05/baltimore-port-reopen-plan-us-army-corps>; Rachel Lerman, Hannah Dormido, Jeanne Whalen, Luis Melgar, and Laris Karklis, *See how the Key Bridge collapse will disrupt the supply of cars, coal, and tofu*, the Washington Post (Mar. 27, 2024),

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2024/03/27/baltimore-port-economy-disruption-bridge-collapse/>.

⁴ See Lori Ann LaRocco, *Logistics companies scramble after bridge collapse closes Port of Baltimore until further notice*, CNBC (Mar. 26, 2024), <https://www.cnbc.com/2024/03/26/logistics-companies-scramble-after-bridge-collapse-closes-port-of-baltimore.html>.

⁵ Tia Maggio and Brooke Butler, *Baltimore port closed indefinitely after bridge collapse; how Georgia ports are being impacted*, WJCL (Apr. 7, 2024), <https://www.wjcl.com/article/baltimore-port-closed-indefinitely-after-bridge-collapse-how-georgia-ports-are-being-impacted/60414601>.

recommendation at any time during this investigation. In the interim, we will keep you and your colleagues apprised of any major developments.

Please be assured that timeliness for completing investigations is always on the forefront of the NTSB; however, we must balance timeliness with quality.

With respect to the second part of your question regarding the opening of the Port, I will defer that question to the State of Maryland and the U.S. Department of Transportation as our purview is the solely the safety investigation.

2. Will the closure of the Port of Baltimore disrupt America's supply chains?

Respectfully, I must defer that question to the State of Maryland and the U.S. Department of Transportation as our purview – by law – is the solely the safety investigation.

3. Will the NTSB consider the effects of a bridge collapse on America's supply chains when making recommendations to Congress on how to prevent a massive transportation disaster like the Key Bridge collapse?

The NTSB's mission and our focus for this investigation and all of our investigations is to determine what happened, how it happened, and to issue safety recommendations aimed at preventing that accident from reoccurring.

4. What can ports across the country do to help prevent a transportation and supply chain disaster like the Key Bridge collapse?

This will be determined as part of our investigation; however, it is important to note some history here. On May 9, 1990, the Liberian bulk carrier M/V Summit Venture rammed a support pier of the western span of the Sunshine Skyway Bridge in Tampa Bay, Florida. As a result of the ramming, the support pier was destroyed and about 1,297 feet of bridge deck and six automobiles fell into the bay and 35 persons died. Repair costs were estimated at about \$30 million for the bridge and about \$1 million for the Summit Venture.

As a result of our investigation, the NTSB recommended that the U.S. Coast Guard, in cooperation with the Federal Highway Administration, conduct a study to determine which existing bridges over the navigable waterways of United States ports and harbors are not equipped with adequate structural pier protection. The Coast Guard responded that they did not have the authority to conduct such a study. The recommendation was Closed – Unacceptable Action by the Board. This something the Federal and all States and other entities who own bridges on navigable waterways can do now to ensure safety.