

**SENATE COMMITTEE ON COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND TRANSPORTATION:  
QUESTIONS FOR THE RECORD**

**FROM THE NOMINATIONS HEARING  
ON MAY 20, 2021**

**Written Questions Submitted to Carlos Monje, Nominee to be Under Secretary of  
Transportation for Policy**

*Submitted by Senator Roger Wicker, Ranking Member*

**Gulf Coast Rail**

**Question 1:** Gulf Coast rail service from New Orleans to Mobile was halted after Hurricane Katrina. Restoring this service is a top priority of mine. Amtrak has filed an application with the Surface Transportation Board (STB) to restore service. I appreciated the Department's strong letter to STB. I look forward to working with you to restore passenger rail service.

- *I believe we can find ways to allow freight and passenger rail to coexist as a part of a fluid and efficient rail network. What role can the Department play in directing investments that support a robust rail network?*
- *Would you have an interest in coming to Mississippi to see the Gulf Coast route?*

**Response:**

If confirmed, I am committed to working with you and key stakeholders, including Amtrak and the freight railroads, to restore passenger rail service to the Gulf Coast. The Department has multiple grant and loan programs in FRA, FTA, and the Secretary's office to help make this restoration of service a reality as part of the American Jobs Plan. The Department has also worked with the Surface Transportation Board to ensure that freight and passenger rail services can work together. As a native of the Gulf Coast, I look forward to making such a visit a possibility.

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**Rural Infrastructure**

**Question 2:** Within DOT, the Build America Bureau administers several grant and loan programs for infrastructure investment. The Build America Bureau is an important resource for state and local governments that need support in applying for grants or loans and pursuing infrastructure projects. In the past, under Secretary Chao's leadership, DOT worked to provide more assistance to rural communities and address their unmet transportation needs.

- *As Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, what specific steps would you take to improve infrastructure for small towns and rural communities?*

- *Follow-up: In your experience, have you found the use of advance refunding on tax-exempt municipal bonds helpful on improving infrastructure? Do you agree that providing additional financing tools for local governments, through authorizing a new class of taxable infrastructure bonds, would also be helpful to improving infrastructure across America?*

**Response:**

Rural and Tribal areas have unique transportation challenges. The fatality rate on rural roads is twice as high as on urban roads, and as a result almost half of highway fatalities occur on rural roads. 80% of closed bridges, and 90% of bridges with vehicle weight limitations are in rural areas. Two-thirds of rural counties only have demand-response transit, which costs twice as much to provide per trip as fixed route service. Infrastructure investments are key to supporting economic growth and to ensuring that residents in rural and Tribal communities have access to jobs, education access and essential basic services like health care. If I am confirmed, I will work closely with the Secretary and the Committee on policies that meet the needs of all communities, including rural communities.

This Administration has placed a high priority on addressing our Nation's historic underinvestment in infrastructure as demonstrated by the President's release of the American Jobs Plan. The Department is open to working with Congress on various options to increase the available funding for states and localities to address urgent transportation infrastructure needs. Additional financing tools can play a constructive role for needed infrastructure improvements, the Department is more than willing to work with the Congress to provide technical assistance on the various eligibilities, requirements, and details of these options. I look forward to working with your team to better understand your ideas about taxable infrastructure bonds. **Essential Air Service**

**Question 3:** The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has created challenges for communities receiving air service through the Essential Air Service (EAS) program because passenger air traffic has drastically fallen. The FY 2021 Consolidated Appropriations Act requires the Department of Transportation to waive some of the subsidy eligibility restrictions given the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

- *What is your perspective on how to ensure these and other smaller communities can receive adequate air service?*

**Response:**

I recognize the financial challenges the EAS program has faced under COVID-19 and that the relief provided by the suspension of certain eligibility requirements under the Consolidated Appropriations Act for FY 2020 and FY 2021 will enable this important program to continue to provide support to these communities. As we continue to recover from the economic effects of the pandemic, I am committed to working with Congress to ensure that the EAS program continues to serve small and rural communities.

## **Bipartisan Infrastructure Legislation**

**Question 4:** In the last surface transportation reauthorization, the FAST Act provided long-term funding certainty for states and the transportation sector. The FAST Act was a bipartisan bill with 83 Senators voting for it. Last year, Congress extended the FAST Act for one year. The extension expires September 30, 2021, so Congress will need to act to ensure our transportation programs receive funding. I believe it is important that infrastructure or surface transportation reauthorization be a bipartisan effort in order to represent the various infrastructure needs throughout our country.

- *With the pending expiration of surface transportation authorization, can you commit to working with me on bipartisan legislation that addresses infrastructure needs in all parts of the country?*

### **Response:**

In my years in the Senate and at DOT, transportation authorization and appropriations legislation was drafted, negotiated, and passed with significant bipartisan support. If confirmed, I very much look forward to working with Secretary Buttigieg and the relevant congressional Committees on transportation legislation that addresses the needs and priorities of states and localities across the country,

If I am confirmed, I also look forward to working with stakeholders from all parts of the country, ensuring that the Department is accessible to and proactively engaging directly with small and rural communities and tribal governments and the elected officials who represent them.

## **Pace of Rulemaking**

**Question 5:** Developing new federal motor vehicle safety standards can take many years, delaying new standards on important safety issues. Outmoded standards such as those that conflict with automated vehicles have remained in effect for far longer than they should, preventing the development of new technologies, for example adaptive headlights.

- *As motor vehicles become more advanced and the global competition only grows stronger, how will you work to ensure standards are updated in a timely and appropriate manner, so the U.S. will gain the maximum safety benefits from advances in technology?*

### **Response:**

If I am confirmed, I will be happy to work with Congress to create a safer, more efficient transportation system with automated vehicles as a priority focus area. This means carefully evaluating regulations and making regulatory decisions based on the best available data and science. Safety has to be the North Star of our oversight of automated vehicles, because Americans expect us to keep them safe when they put their lives in the hands of this technology. But you are right that the regulation needs to be flexible, data-driven and risk-based.

DOT takes a holistic approach to identifying rulemaking needs, and prioritizes them through publicly released Regulatory Agendas that encompasses transportation across all the modes. As part of the regulatory agenda formulation we take into account available agency resources, priority safety needs that require rulemaking, statutory requirements for actions requiring

rulemaking, recommendations from the National Transportation Safety Board, and other agencies.

For technical accuracy, suggest something along these lines:...create a safer, more efficient transportation system with automated vehicles as a priority focus area.

### **U.S. –EU Open Skies**

**Question 6:** As you are aware, the U.S.-EU Open Skies agreement has eliminated government interference in the commercial decisions of air carriers about routes, capacity, and pricing. Open Skies has freed up carriers to provide more affordable, convenient, and efficient air service for consumers. The free marketplace created by Open Skies has been a boon for jobs in the aviation industry and beyond. If the U.S. takes action that breaches any one of our Open Skies agreements, it would put these jobs in jeopardy.

- *With the understanding that this administration is committed to our nation's recovery from Covid-19 and supporting job opportunities for all, will you commit to uphold US trade policy – including Open Skies agreements?*

### **Response:**

The aviation industry is critical to American competitiveness. We need to ensure that U.S. airlines have a fair and level playing field from which to operate and do not experience competitive disadvantages. If I am confirmed, I will support and enforce aviation trade agreements and policies that advance the interests of the American public, American businesses, and American workers.

Open Skies has been the foundation of U.S. international air transportation policy since 1992. The policy has enabled the U.S. aviation industry to support more than 10 million American jobs and \$1.7 trillion in economic activity. We continue to recognize the great importance of Open Skies to the Department's diverse stakeholders, including airports, airlines, labor, members of the traveling and shipping public, and others.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department has used Open Skies tools to protect U.S. interests against various foreign governments' discriminatory flight restrictions and troubling crew treatment practices.

### **Autonomous Vehicles (AV)**

**Question 7:** According to NHTSA, there were over 36,000 deaths on federal highways in 2019. Automated vehicles have the potential to significantly reduce traffic fatalities, increase mobility for the elderly and disabled, and improve efficiency. Senator Cantwell and I have worked alongside the leadership of Senators Thune and Peters in advancing the development of AV legislation.

- *What steps can and should the Department take to advance the safe testing and deployment of automated vehicles in the U.S. to ensure that the U.S. remains a global leader in innovation?*

### **Response:**

If confirmed, I am eager to work with you and your colleagues in Congress to ensure that the Federal government helps to lead the way in developing a safe autonomous vehicle industry nationwide.

The Department has released multiple guidance documents to ensure AVs are developed, tested, and deployed in a safe manner. These documents position the United States to be competitive internationally. The Department continues to move forward on standing up and staffing the Highly-Automated Systems Safety Center of Excellence, to provide a core expertise to validate automation applications across all modes of transportation.

If confirmed, I will work with industry, safety organizations, American workers, environmental groups, and other stakeholders to maintain the primacy of safety in our work while creating American jobs and advancing American technological leadership.

***Submitted by Senator Dan Sullivan***

### **Aviation Safety**

A February 2020 NTSB report pointed to a recent 10-year period where the total accident rate in Alaska was 2.35 times higher than the rest of the United States. During the same period, the fatal accident rate in Alaska was 1.34 times higher.

The FAA Alaska Aviation Safety Initiative is an FAA effort to respond to the February 2020 NTSB Report and the Alaska Aviation Safety Summit, which I hosted with Administrator Dickson in October 2020. This effort will identify safety improvements and investments for the Alaska Region, and will make progress on the effort for FAA and DOT to take a holistic view of DOT programs to ensure the inherent bias no longer inhibits infrastructure investments in our remote Alaska Native communities.

**Question 1:** Will you support the efforts of the FAA Alaska Aviation Safety Initiative?

### **Response:**

Yes. The Department and I are supportive of the FAA Alaska Aviation Safety Initiative. Currently, the FAA is holding outreach sessions with a broad spectrum of the aviation stakeholders in Alaska aviation, to include air carriers and operators, general aviation, the military, and governmental entities to determine how current efforts can be reviewed, prioritized, and integrated responsibly to have a substantial, positive, and rapid impact on improving aviation safety in Alaska. The Department looks forward to working with Congress to ensure infrastructure investments are focused on communities that will see the most benefit.

### **Denali Commission Support**

We need federal partners to identify funding for both rebuilding vital infrastructure and to identify adaption strategies for the new reality associated with the infrastructure damage in Alaska from warming that could cost the state \$110 million to \$278 million annually, per the National Climate Assessment conducted in 2018. While visiting Kotzebue in September 2015,

then-President Obama identified the Denali Commission as a key federal partner to assist in responding to climate change. However, no funding was identified in the budgets of previous Administrations to address this challenge.

Similar to the other regional commissions, the Denali Commission used to be allocated Highway Transportation Fund dollars for infrastructure. The Denali Access Program used to fund infrastructure projects in remote native communities in Alaska.

**Question 2:** Would you support funding and revitalizing the Denali Access Program to lead with the rebuilding infrastructure impacted by erosion and permafrost thaw? What can you do to support this effort?

**Response:**

I look forward to working with you and the Committee to address the transportation needs of remote native communities in Alaska and across the Nation. We will follow Congress' direction in regards to the Denali Commission.

President Biden is committed to increasing resilience in the most essential transportation assets and services for vulnerable communities, including remote native communities. Building back better requires that the funds we invest make our infrastructure more resilient in the face of increasingly severe floods, wildfires, hurricanes, and other risks.

**Open Skies**

Alaska is a critical state for the global aviation industry, particularly when it comes to air cargo. Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport (ANC) is home to the fourth busiest cargo airport in the world. In 2020, cargo surged significantly and this has continued into 2021. ANC has become a critical waypoint for goods, including PPE, traveling from all over the world to homes and businesses of our constituents confined by the pandemic.

Even before the pandemic, cargo activity was the source of a majority of the good-paying jobs at ANC, with the airport supporting about 10% of the jobs in Anchorage alone. This is reflection of the important relationship our state has with air cargo. Alaskans depend on this service for shipments of both import and export deliveries of essential goods to support their livelihoods and businesses.

Because of agreements that have been long-sought after and secured by the U.S. with more than 130 nations, cargo carriers have been able to support the livelihoods of Alaskans and 1.4 million workers nationwide. In addition, the agreements enable tourists to easily travel to Alaska and support our tourism economy as well as provide export markets, which are critical to Alaska's seafood industry - another source of jobs that are the fabric of Alaska's economy. Sadly, both sectors have been battered by the pandemic and we must do everything possible to support their recovery.

**Question 3:** One of the most important economic and trade policies I worked on during my time as the U.S. State Department's Assistant Secretary for Economic, Energy and Business Affairs was Open Skies and securing air transport agreements with nations around the world. I was confident these agreements would spur innovation and jobs then and I am proud to see the results today, especially in terms of jobs generated and economic benefits to Alaska. If you are to become the U.S. Department of Transportation's Undersecretary for Policy, will you ensure the U.S. remains firmly committed to these agreements that support the cargo industry's ability to support good paying jobs and the timely transport of goods and other potentially lifesaving deliveries to our communities?

**Response:**

The aviation industry is critical to American competitiveness, and the Ted Stevens Anchorage International Airport maintains a notably significant role in the movement of international cargo between the United States and Asia, including PPE. The Department continues to support Anchorage's unique and valuable position as a cargo hub, through a specific grant of a request from Alaska for exemption authority to allow foreign airlines to more easily transfer their U.S.-bound cargo at Anchorage. This grant has also been recently expanded to passenger transfers as well, further attracting airlines to utilize Anchorage and benefit Alaska's tourism industry.

Open Skies has been the foundation of U.S. international air transportation policy since 1992. The policy has enabled the U.S. aviation industry to support more than 10 million American jobs and \$1.7 trillion in economic activity. Through our current Open Skies agreements with over 130 foreign partners, U.S. airlines enjoy greater flexibility to provide more affordable, convenient, and efficient air service to both U.S. travelers and shippers. If I am confirmed, I will support and enforce aviation trade agreements and policies that advance the interests of the American public, American businesses, and American workers.