

Testimony of
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I am Commissioner Velma Williams from the City of Sanford, Florida and I am honored to be invited to testify before you today regarding the benefits of intercity rail passenger service.

I also want you to know how proud we are in my community to be represented here in Washington by Congresswoman Corrine Brown, the Chair of this Subcommittee, and Congressman John Mica, the ranking Republican Member of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure.

The City of Sanford is about twenty miles north of downtown Orlando. We are the original “big city” in Central Florida. This was because of our location on the St. Johns River and a very early connection with railroads. In 1880, the South Florida Railroad was completed between Sanford and Orlando to carry passengers and freight from our port to inland destinations, including a small settlement to the south named Orlando. In 1881, the railroad was extended west to Tampa.

Today, Sanford is a thriving community of 52,000 people. We are the largest city in Seminole County and we serve as the county seat. Our economy had been based on agriculture but, like much of Florida, the landscape changed quickly. We are fortunate to have a growing and diverse economy. Traditional cities like Sanford are being revitalized and new developments are being sited in a manner to preserve much of the “natural Florida” that residents cherish.

Our region’s transportation system has played an important role in the City of Sanford’s evolution. We are served by Interstate-4, the GreeneWay (which is our equivalent of a “beltway”), an extensive network of local roads, Orlando Sanford International Airport, Lynx bus service and Amtrak.

Traffic congestion, especially on Interstate-4, is a chronic problem. Additional lanes have been added in recent years, interchanges have been rebuilt and a major regional chokepoint was fixed with the construction of a new bridge across the St. Johns River. Even with these improvements, Interstate-4 -- which is the spine of our region’s transportation system -- is the road that Central Florida drivers want to avoid. This often causes problems for visitors and freight movement as well.

Our national transportation policy in recent decades has focused on highways and automobile travel. The Interstate Highway System has been the centerpiece of this policy. Designed in the 1950’s and completed just recently, it was an extraordinary accomplishment. It has connected metropolitan areas across our great nation and set a standard that is the envy of most countries throughout the world. State and regional transportation policies have, for the most part, also emphasized highways and automobile travel.

Many will say that these policies have served us well -- and there is a great deal of truth to this -- but something happened along the way. We somehow forgot about the important role that railroads have played in our

nation's history and we have failed to see the opportunities they hold for our future. It is time for a change, and that can begin today with this hearing.

Our national rail passenger system – Amtrak – has a long and complex history. I am not an expert on this but I can speak to what people see today, at least in Central Florida, and what I believe people would like to have as part of our future.

Amtrak provides an attractive and reasonably priced alternative to the automobile in the Northeast corridor between Washington and Boston. In addition, I have heard it is popular in some areas of California. However, beyond that, Amtrak does not have the financial means to provide the type of service that most people demand today.

In Central Florida, Amtrak provides several trips a day in each direction between Miami and points north. Service for regular passenger trains is provided at three stations – one in downtown Orlando, one in Winter Park and one in Kissimmee. Amtrak's Sanford Station for regular passenger trains was closed a number of years ago to reduce operating costs. I would like to have this historic station reopened by Amtrak. This would increase ridership and avoid having people travel south to Winter Park or Orlando to use Amtrak trains. It also would be a nice complement to the start-up of the Central Florida commuter rail service in the Year 2010.

Amtrak continues to operate the AutoTrain station in the City of Sanford. This is an innovative service that has proven to be very popular. Passengers – along with their cars -- travel in comfort on overnight trips between Lorton, Virginia (just outside Washington, D.C.) and Sanford, Florida. This takes cars off Interstate-95 and Interstate-4. When travelers arrive in the City of Sanford, they can enjoy all that Central Florida has to offer or continue their trip to Tampa, southwest Florida or Miami via Florida's Turnpike. This service is unique in the

country. It serves as a wonderful example of how the market responds to innovative ideas. I was very pleased to hear recently that Amtrak is planning to make improvements to the Sanford AutoTrain station.

Last year, nearly 400,000 passengers used the Amtrak stations in Central Florida. This number has fluctuated in recent years. There are a number of suspected reasons for this, including many bargain airline fares between northeast cities and Orlando. However, I firmly believe that if trains were more frequent and trains operated at higher speeds, there could be a significant increase in Amtrak passengers.

I also believe the potential is enormous for quality, high speed rail passenger service between Florida's major cities. At a minimum, this would need to include Jacksonville, Tallahassee, Orlando, Tampa and Miami. In the Year 2000, Florida voters approved an amendment to the Florida Constitution to provide for the construction of an intrastate high-speed rail passenger system. A good deal of planning was done to advance the project as an innovative, public-private partnership. However, some in key state leadership positions did not favor the project and, four years later, voters were persuaded to remove the mandate from the Florida Constitution. This was a major setback for those promoting a more balanced transportation system, especially with so many of Florida's interstate highways being overwhelmed with traffic congestion. According to the Florida Department of Transportation, conditions on these roads are expected to deteriorate even further in the coming years as automobile travel and freight traffic continue to grow.

Conditions in my region and throughout the State of Florida are, in my opinion, ideal for a rebirth of passenger rail service. But today I am asking the distinguished members of this Subcommittee to image the possibilities for an ambitious passenger rail program on a national scale. This will involve upgrading existing lines, establishing new routes, refurbishing existing stations, building

new stations, investing in new equipment and providing new services. In addition, it will probably involve new ways of doing business, perhaps in cooperation with the private sector and local communities.

We have an exciting opportunity before us with work that is now about to get underway on the next federal transportation bill. The current legislation, SAFETEA-LU, will expire in September 2009. The new legislation will define our national transportation policies and identify how we will pay for needed improvements. This is an enormous undertaking. We look to our elected officials serving in Washington for leadership in this critical area.

I believe the time has come for a bold new vision that will carry us through the next century. Yesterday's solutions have generally served us well but today's problems require broader solutions. And beyond today's problems, we need to think about the challenges that will face us in the coming years. Our national transportation agenda needs to move us in a new direction for a sustainable future. A robust, national passenger rail program can play an important role. We can look to countries throughout Europe and Asia where billions of dollars are being invested in passenger rail projects. These countries see the benefit of investing in rail passenger service, and the same can be accomplished here.

Deliberations regarding the new federal transportation bill must include an expanded role for Amtrak passenger rail service. A number of market realities support this position. These include:

- Traffic congestion levels. Many sections of the interstate highway system are strained or failing. Even after huge investments are made, predictions call for conditions to get worse. Intercity passenger rail can move more people in a more efficient manner.

- Community impacts. It is simply not practical to widen some highways beyond the number of lanes they have today. In major metropolitan areas, downtowns and many neighboring communities would be obliterated. So while cost is often cited as a reason for not widening roads, community impacts should receive equal attention. Intercity passenger rail can protect communities and add to their vitality.
- Freight Movement. As changes have happened in our national economy and international trade has flourished, freight truck volumes have soared. Freight traffic – long-haul and short-haul -- is expected to grow at a faster rate than overall travel demand. Intercity passenger rail service can take some automobiles off the road to improve the movement of freight truck traffic.
- Air Travel. Many airports, especially in metropolitan areas, have no room for further expansion. A first-class rail passenger system can serve many short to mid-range intercity trips, freeing up airport capacity to handle long-distance flights.
- Energy Independence. This needs to be a centerpiece of our new national transportation policy. As gas prices climb putting a strain on family budgets and with the international oil supply situation getting more volatile, reducing our dependence on foreign oil must be a top national priority. Intercity passenger rail service can help.
- The Environment. There is no denying that our transportation choices have a profound impact on our environment. This includes such things as impervious ground, water run-off and the impact of vehicle emissions on air quality. Providing people with the option of intercity rail passenger service will reduce harmful environmental impacts.

President Abraham Lincoln, with the support of Congress, brought about the construction of the transcontinental railroad in the 1860's. This railroad unified our nation at a critical time and shaped our future. Nearly 100 years later, President Dwight Eisenhower had the vision to create the Interstate Highway System. Again, Congress supported this over decades to meet our nation's needs. This too shaped our future and brought us to where we are today. Each of these actions took courage and bold leadership. History shows us that the pay-offs were enormous.

So let us ask ourselves, what is the next bold initiative that will shape our nation's transportation future and where will it come from? I urge you to make the development of an ambitious national rail passenger system part of the next federal transportation bill. This will mean expanding the role of Amtrak and looking at new business models. It also will mean challenging industry to develop more cost-effective construction methods and new passenger rail technologies.

If this national passenger rail system is developed, local elected officials throughout the country, like me, will need to be responsible for local and regional rail projects to connect with the national rail system. This is the same as we do with providing access roads to interstate highways . . . but with a new mindset.

In closing, I encourage you to think big. I encourage you to be bold. I encourage to embrace change. These are qualities that have made our country what it is today . . . and these same qualities will define our future.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today. This has been a true honor for me as a humble, local elected official. And thank you for the good work that you do and for your leadership on this important issue.