

TESTIMONY OF STEVE HEMINGER
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SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA

PRESENTED TO THE JOINT FIELD HEARING
SENATE COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND PUBLIC WORKS
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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Good morning, Chairman Boxer, Chairman Mica, and members of the committees. My name is Steve Heminger and I am executive director of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC). MTC is the metropolitan planning organization and regional toll authority for the San Francisco Bay Area. I was also privileged to serve on the congressionally-chartered National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, which published its report *Transportation for Tomorrow* in January 2008. I attach the executive summary of that report to my testimony for the record.

Like many in the transportation community, I was delighted to see the two chairs of these committees sitting side-by-side at the most recent State of the Union Address. It is commendable that you have continued to exemplify that spirit of bi-partisanship by convening this joint field hearing. Perhaps, as the classic movie ending goes, “this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.” Such a strong partnership – between the House and Senate, between Democrats and Republicans – has never been more essential to rescue a federal surface transportation law adrift on a sea of short-term program extensions, General Fund borrowing, and competing national priorities. We desperately need your leadership to firmly grasp the wheel and chart a new course for the nation’s infrastructure investment programs. Our hopes are very much in your hands.

I know that in your role as senior Members of Congress, you are currently engaged in a debate in Washington DC about a fundamental question: what is the proper role for the federal government in our national life? That broad question is especially relevant today in the specific field of surface transportation investment. During construction of the Interstate Highway System, the mission of the federal government was crystal clear: to convert lines on a road map into miles of concrete, asphalt and steel. Some two decades since the substantial completion of that engineering marvel, it is much more difficult to discern what the federal program is up to. In the words of our Policy Commission report: “The Commission believes that surface transportation programs cannot fully contribute to economic growth, international competitiveness, or other national goals without a national investment strategy. Furthermore . . . this investment strategy can serve as a basis for allocating funds among States and metropolitan areas to maximize the return on Federal investment and achieve the greatest overall improvement in surface transportation conditions and performance.” Or as the father of the Interstate System put it more bluntly: “Plans are nothing; planning is everything.”

Transportation for Tomorrow recommended several areas of intense focus for a renewed level of federal investment; let me highlight three of them in my brief testimony today. First, there should be no question that Job #1 is to protect the federally significant infrastructure we’ve already built. The Interstate System is the nation’s most important surface transportation asset, with a replacement value in the trillions. Anyone who’s done any driving lately knows what kind of shape it’s in. The nation’s seven largest rail transit systems face a staggering repair backlog of \$50 billion. Deficient bridges litter the landscape – sometimes, tragically, quite literally. While the elevated investment in

system maintenance during the “TEA Era” has improved conditions somewhat, we are still earning failing grades in the annual report of the American Society of Civil Engineers. We can and must do better.

Second, if any transportation priority justifies a robust federal role better than goods movement, I don’t know what it is. Freight flows freely between state borders and beyond our national borders in the global economy. Article I, Section 8 gives Congress a constitutional mandate “to regulate commerce with foreign nations, and among the several states.” Yet, among the 108 federal surface transportation programs in current law, not a single one is dedicated to goods movement on a meaningful national scale with all modes – rail, truck, and water – eligible for investment. The goods movement challenge facing the United States is too daunting for any single state to overcome, even a state as large and dynamic as California. The Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach are Exhibit A for a new federal focus on freight, so you’ve brought this joint hearing to the right place.

Finally, I would be derelict in my duty as a board member of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations if I did not make the case for a more productive partnership between the federal government and the nation’s major metropolitan areas. Just the top 50 metropolitan areas generate 60% of U.S. gross domestic product. In transportation terms, the same areas account for 90% of all public transit commuters and suffer nearly 100% of urban traffic congestion. These economic engines are not firing on all cylinders because the federal transportation program still treats them as wards of the States, rather than as valuable partners in creating the nation’s future economic prosperity. The Policy Commission recommended that a distinct federal program be

established to de-congest the flow of both people and goods in these major metropolitan areas, and I continue to believe that such an approach would pay huge economic dividends – not just for those regions, but for the country as a whole.

In transmitting his plans for the Interstate System to Congress in 1955, President Eisenhower stated: “Our unity as a nation is sustained by free communication of thought and by easy transportation of people and goods . . . Together the unifying forces of our communication and transportation systems are dynamic elements in the very name we bear – United States. Without them, we would be a mere alliance of many separate parts.” In recent reauthorization squabbles over donor state guarantees and project earmarking, Ike’s message seems to have gotten lost. It’s never too late to make a fresh start, however, and your committees have the goodwill and best wishes of numerous transportation stakeholders across the nation to do just that.

Thank you both very much for the opportunity to testify at this joint field hearing. I would be pleased to respond to any questions you might have.