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Congressman Earl Blumenauer

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Earl Blumenauer".

Testimony in front of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee

April 5, 2011

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with the Committee today about the Surface Transportation Reauthorization. The Surface Transportation Bill presents Congress with a number of very important opportunities: to put Americans to work with family wage jobs, to invest in our communities, to move people and goods from place to place as efficiently as possible, and to renew and rebuild America.

First and foremost, I hope that the transportation bill will improve flexibility within our transportation system. Americans want more transportation choices, and they believe that their government should invest in more than one type of transportation. A recent poll done by the National Association of Realtors shows that over 50% of Americans think we should invest more in public transit and active transportation options, instead of only investing in traditional roadbuilding projects. Americans don't want to be forced into their cars—they want to choose a mode that works for them, whether that's transit, driving, walking, biking or rail. The impact of congestion on the US economy has increased 459% in the past thirty years, reaching \$115 billion in 2009. We should increase transportation system capacity in a way that is cost efficient, invests in our communities, and provides Americans with the options they want and deserve.

As communities invest in transportation, the federal government should be a willing partner, not another obstacle. Through multimodal grants in cooperation with the Partnership for Sustainable Communities, the Department of Transportation has worked efficiently with communities to decrease red tape, ensure government coordination, and fund projects supported by multiple stakeholders. The demand for this type of program is obvious; in the first round of grant-making, 1,456 communities applied for funding and only 51 projects were awarded. Demand was 40 times greater than available funding. The Sustainable Communities Partnership is an excellent example of a government program that coordinates government spending to help communities

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implement projects quickly. I hope that this Committee will use the Partnership as a blueprint for more effective, efficient government programs.

In addition to helping the government be a better partner, the transportation bill also presents an opportunity to reframe the regulatory debate. Chairman Mica and others on this committee have spoken adamantly about the need for regulation reform, and I agree that the way we regulate could be improved. Regulations are important: they ensure that important environment and health protections are met, that communities are engaged, that projects are fully thought through and the appropriate planning is completed. But what is really important is not the process itself, but the results.

Having agencies dictate specifics is not the most innovative, cost-effective or timely process, but there is an alternative: why not give parties latitude on how to comply with the standards as long as the standards are met or exceeded? For example, California's environmental regulations are stronger than the federal government. In this instance, it does not make sense to force California to fill out both sets of paperwork. What matters is that projects meet the goal, now how they get there. I believe that we can create regulations based on performance, not process, that deliver better results, require less time and impose a smaller burden on communities. I look forward to working with the Committee and the Administration on this proposal.

Finally, none of the changes we would all like to see will be made without adequate funding. Without additional revenue Congress cannot hope to deliver what our communities and our constituents expect. The American Society of Civil Engineers estimated that we need \$1.258 trillion of investment over the next five years to bring our transportation system to basic safety and service levels. We cannot afford to let our bridges and our roads and our transit systems fall apart. I have testified previously in front of this Committee and the Ways and Means Committee on the importance of infrastructure investment, and my commitment to work with all of you to find a solution.

There is no doubt that our funding problems are getting worse. In real dollars, the funds we receive from the gas tax have half as much power as they did in 1992. As our cars get more and more efficient, we will see even smaller returns to the Highway Trust Fund. Last Congress I introduced H.R.3311, to expand upon the Vehicle Miles Travelled pilot program established in SAFETEA-LU. This is an obvious next step towards Trust Fund solvency, and I hope that this Committee will consider it. In addition, while we look at the larger picture, there are small steps we can take, such as switching from an excise tax on truck sales to a slightly higher fuel tax. This change would increase stability in the Trust Fund and help with fleet modernization.

The path forward is not as difficult as we sometimes think it is. We know what we need to do, we simply need to summon our political courage and move forward.

Reauthorizing the Surface Transportation Bill, at an appropriate level of investment, is the fastest way to put Americans back to work. We have an obligation to our communities, our constituents, and our businesses: to write a bill that provides safe, convenient, efficient options, that creates safe, livable and economically secure communities and that will renew and rebuild America. I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and look forward to working with the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee on this vital legislation.