

STATEMENT OF
SENATOR JON TESTER

COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS
UNITED STATES SENATE

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Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for holding this important hearing. I am pleased to be a member of this Committee as we begin the discussion about the next transportation reauthorization bill.

In Montana, transit – buses especially – are critically important for transportation across the state. When we lose Essential Air Service, or a large air provider pulls out of an airport, it's generally intercity bus service that takes its place to move people hundreds and hundreds of miles across the state.

There's no doubt about it – you cannot have economic development without a smart, effective transportation system. And transit is a key part of that, even in rural America. Five years ago, a significant increase in transit spending allowed rural states like Montana to expand intercity bus service, as well as local transit services, to almost all of our counties. It is critical that we maintain this important funding that has helped safely connect folks in isolated areas to commerce, medical care, and family members. However, there is still more to do. For instance, we must ensure that all paratransit vehicles are wheelchair accessible, and that transportation for veterans is also accessible for vets with disabilities.

In Montana, we also have a high fatality rate for drivers on rural roads. I'd like to see – in the very least – students and elderly folks have access to a safe transit option to get to school, medical appointments, and local meetings.

I appreciate you all coming today. As the Senate begins to look forward to the upcoming transportation reauthorization bill, I am hopeful that our Committee will be able to craft a transit portion that is fair to small and rural communities, where transit ridership has increased dramatically, even as the economy has gone into a downturn. I look forward to working with the new Secretary of Transportation, Secretary LaHood, the Chairman and this Committee to ensure a strong rural component to future transit and transportation infrastructure legislation.