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WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF BARBARA K. CLINE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR-PRAIRIE HILLS TRANSIT AND PRESIDENT-COMMUNITY TRANSPORTATION ASSOCIATION OF AMERICA

BEFORE THE UNITED STATES SENATE COMMITTEE ON BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON HOUSING, TRANSPORTATION AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

JUNE 8, 2021

Subcommittee Chair Smith, Ranking Subcommittee Member Rounds and Members of the Subcommittee and full Committee:

My name is Barb Cline and I have been the Executive Director of Prairie Hills Transit for all of its 31 years. Prairie Hills Transit began service using the old green van in the back parking lot as a half-day transportation service for older adults in the Spearfish community.

I would like to sincerely thank you for supporting community and public transit in rural America, and for holding this important hearing. The challenges of providing transportation in rural and small-urban communities are unique and we rely on the support of this subcommittee to assist us in this important mission.

Today, Prairie Hills Transit operates in a 16,500 square-mile area of western South Dakota bordering the states of Nebraska, North Dakota and Wyoming. Using 50 vehicles, our staff of 65 provide public transportation that includes non-emergency medical transportation in nine counties and 15 small communities that vary in size from rural to frontier. Comparatively our ridership fell from 125,294 in 2019 to 67,333 in 2020. Our operation is funded through Section 5311 and relies heavily on city, county and the state for local share. I would urge you to look closely at local share flexibility for rural transit systems — something I know Senators Smith and Rounds have committed to with their co-sponsored Investments in Rural Transit Act of 2021.

An important factor for any rural transit system is adequate capital investment. When the useful life and age of our vehicles require replacement we are consistently looking at our inventory to make certain that our data is ready to apply for Capital and Discretionary awards. Approximately 72% of revenue vehicles are in a State of Good Repair.

In addition to vehicles, rural transit systems like mine need to house their vehicles in garages that help protect them from the extreme weather conditions we are subjected to in South Dakota. With our expansive service area, we need six buildings that allow us a place to clean and store our fleet, with most having a small office area and restroom for our drivers. Our main multi-model facility in Spearfish serves as a Jefferson Lines intercity bus depot, serves as our primary one-call center, houses a full maintenance shop, administration offices and offers a licensed child care center for 41 children.

More than anything else, systems like Prairie Hills Transit need predictable, sustainable and increased growth in the FTA Section 5311 funding in the reauthorization of the FAST Act. The ability and flexibility to continue using these Section 5339 funds for capital assistance is also imperative. For Prairie Hills Transit our ability to use Section 5310 dollars for maintenance and repairs has been of significant value and cost savings. Because we have our own mechanic and shop we have been able to stretch the dollars we receive even further.

Rural transit systems are all unique, and operate quite differently from the traditional public transit operations in our nation's biggest cities. Collectively, we make sure people get to work, to the doctor, to child care, school, dialysis, or even home after being discharged from the hospital. This morning I met with the largest regional hospital in Western South Dakota to discuss Prairie Hills Transit's role in creating successful healthcare outcomes. At noon, my team met to discuss the vital role our drivers and vehicles play in making sure veterans living in highly rural counties have access to their healthcare appointments that are sometimes several hundred miles away. This afternoon I'll drive 200 miles to meet with an advisory committee who wants to begin new service in their community.

My testimony draws on the significant experience I have in leading Prairie Hills Transit, and as the President of the Community Transportation Association of America's (CTAA) Board of Directors, which provides training, certification, resources and advocates on behalf of rural and tribal transit agencies across the nation. I speak today not only for myself and other transit professionals, but most importantly for our communities and the residents who rely on our services who without us would have no voice. I speak for the dialysis patients who remain independent and in their homes because of our services. I speak for the mom who was able to get a higher paying job to support her family but had no way to get her children from day care to school in the morning or from school to daycare in the afternoon without public transportation. I speak for the woman who travels over 50 miles one way to see her husband of 65 years in a nursing home because she can no longer care for him in their home and transportation makes that possible.

I provide my testimony today on the unique challenges of rural transit with regard to access to capital, system development in very small rural communities, vast distances traveled, and the difficulties of leveraging consistent financial support to develop and maintain vital transportation services. For many people, rural transit is not a choice but rather an inevitable decision made because they have no other means to get where they need to go. I'm here because without passionate advocacy built on years of experience, public transit in our rural areas could easily become lost or pushed aside because it just wasn't big enough to worry about.

This is the third time I have had the privilege of testifying before this committee and I hope each time I've left a footprint of who and what public transit means to our rural communities. To help rural transit providers continue to innovate and provide services that meet the needs of our communities, I'd like to offer five top policy priorities for your consideration.

- Increased Section 5339 bus and bus facility investment, with specific set-asides for rural public transit operations, to allow these agencies to replace aging vehicle fleets, tap new zero-emission vehicle technology and build needed transit facilities.
- Increased local share flexibility for rural transit operators
- Right-sized regulations that take into account the size and budgets of smaller operators.

- Consistent growth in Section 5311 funding throughout the life of the FAST Act's successor.
- Consideration for rural transit systems in all of the new programs under review to improve transit efficiency, target services for areas of persistent poverty, provide technical assistance and coordinate public transit with healthcare.

From my system's beginning — operating a van four hours per day — we have become one of the foremost rural systems in the nation. We realized early that transportation most certainly was going to continue to grow and that we always wanted to stay a project ahead of doing the same thing we'd always done. Our initial funding was for senior transportation but it quickly grew to serve the general public because of the need and demand. Other communities, local elected officials and economic development groups in our expansive service area realized that we provide safe, efficient service and wanted to use it. That's the basis of the coordinated model that has served so many rural public transit systems well.

To continue to grow and adapt our service at Prairie Hills Transit, we have applied for and won many grants to improve our technology, equipment safety, and improve local partnerships. For smaller rural systems this is often very challenging because of time required to develop it, the significant technical knowledge required to complete and apply for it and the small staff putting it together between their other duties.

Prairie hills Transit has been a subrecipient of a HRTG (Highly Rural Transportation Grant) for several years operating in highly rural counties of South Dakota together with our partners at River Cities Transit in our state capital of Pierre. Our service provides cost-free transportation for Veterans to medical appointments from their homes to the appointment location. We have also pursued Memorandum of Agreements with six Wyoming agencies to offer their veterans the same opportunity. For transit agencies in both states, as well as our veterans, this is an amazing service and also allows additional funding from other resources to help support public transportation systems providing the service.

Ten years ago, we were approached by Regional Health (now Monument Health) with a request to contract with them to provide discharge transportation for them from Rapid City to the patient's destination. This agreement expanded upon already existing contracts with the majority of their other hospitals, nursing homes, assisted livings, and medical clinics. This operation has really served to expand healthcare connectivity in much of western South Dakota. Additionally, it has served as a way to provide additional services for the many other independent hospital and varied healthcare entities needing transportation for residents/patients.

The past 15 months with the COVID-19 pandemic has challenged rural transit operators. Prairie Hills Transit was grateful to receive \$2.2 million from the CARES Act, which we've used to keep our operations running and employees paid. We did not let go of a single employee during the pandemic, which is really helping us as demand for transit ramps back up (we're up to more than 80% of pre-COVID levels).

Prairie Hills Transit, under the guidance of our partners as the South Dakota Department of Transportation, has consistently consolidated existing transportation systems from communities needing additional support. We continue to network with smaller communities as service needs are defined and we are able to financially support the service. For example, most recently we assumed

existing transportation in Lemmon, have contracted with the Bennett County Hospital and Nursing Home in Martin, and are working toward revitalized service in Edgemont. For both Martin and Edgemont, we have applied for grants to help through both RTAP and AARP. While we know how to stretch a shoestring transit budget, we also know that increased Section 5311 investment will be the best way we can truly guarantee continue support to these communities who have significant elderly and minority populations. Again, it's important to note that even if Section 5311 funds are available the local share needed in these smaller communities can be very difficult to raise.

In closing I'd like to take the dollars and cents out of this testimony and bring it back to the people — your constituents. Transit systems in rural America take challenges and turn them into opportunities because we see the value of mobility every single day. It might be a medical appointment for a resident who hasn't left her home in weeks, it might be the dazzling smile a youngster with Downs Syndrome gives the driver that picks them up for school each day, or it could be a driver dropping a lanyard for the tooth fairy off to the child's home after his shift is over because he knows how important it is to that child (and the tooth fairy). None of us can place a value on these trips that public transportation performs every day, but those of us who sit in my seat know they are priceless each and every day.

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