

WRITTEN STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON
BANKING, HOUSING, AND URBAN AFFAIRS

“21ST CENTURY COMMUNITIES:
PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE INVESTMENT AND
FAST ACT REAUTHORIZATION”

April 15, 2021

Thank you to Chairman Brown and Ranking Member Toomey for including in this important hearing.

I am the director of Transportation for America, a national nonprofit committed to a transportation system that connects people to jobs and essential services by all modes of travel no matter their financial means or physical ability. We do our work through direct technical assistance to local and state agencies, research and analysis of how the existing transportation system is working, and policy development and advocacy.

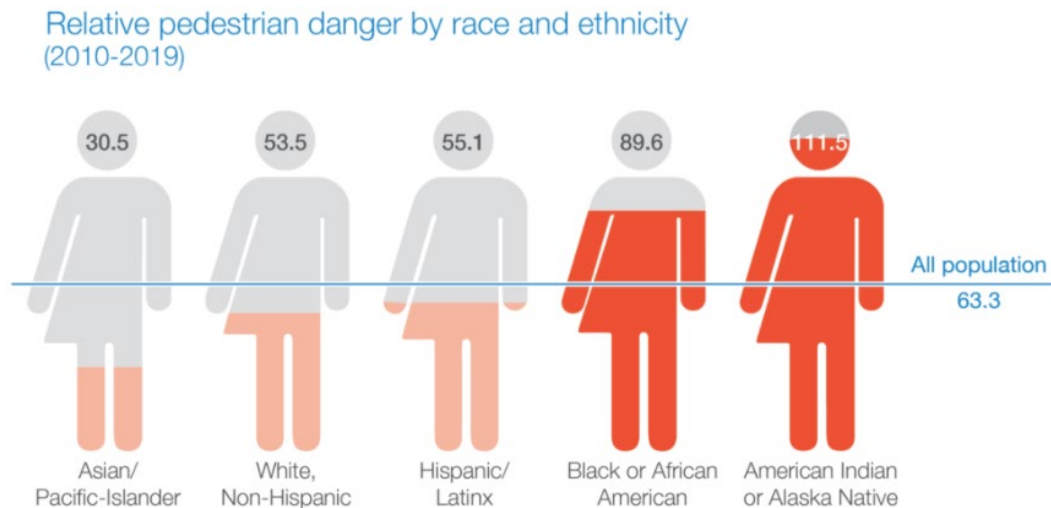
Transportation for America has called for Congress to use the next surface transportation bill to accomplish three things: 1) address the maintenance backlog by adopting a fix it first strategy; 2) improve the safety of our roadways by prioritizing safety over vehicle speed; and 3) measure the success of our transportation system based on how well it connects people (in and out of a car) to jobs and essential services.

These [three principles](#) are key to creating jobs, both by connecting people to work and for the people who work on the transportation system that takes them there; for reducing climate emissions; and for ensuring equitable access to opportunity. Transit is a crucial component in all of these goals.

Over the last year, Transportation for America and its partners have been excited to see Congress recognize how essential transit is by coming together on a bipartisan basis to keep transit operating for our essential workers through emergency operating funds. Through this act, Congress recognized that everyone is transit dependent. Those of us who can drive to the grocery or the hospital rely on the people that

stock the shelves or provide medical treatment who might need transit to get to work. Now we will need to pull together again as we move out of the pandemic to help people get back to work and to build the 21st century transportation system we need.

The transportation system was not efficient, safe, affordable or equitable before COVID. We had rising fatalities for those outside of a car – a 45% increase over the last 10 reported years, 2010-2019). The exposure to danger changes based on race and ethnicity, as our recent [Dangerous by Design](#) showed.



Preliminary data from 2020 showed a massive increase in roadway fatalities for people in and out of cars. While traffic levels dropped 13 percent, fatalities increased 8 percent, causing the greatest increase in the fatality rate in 96 years. As traffic dropped, speeding increased because our roadways are built to encourage high-speed vehicle travel. That danger has always been a barrier for transit users, but last year it was more dangerous than ever. And it is a danger that applies equally to people in urban and rural places.

Our transportation system was inequitable before COVID. The lack of reliable transit in the US means low income Americans to spend close to 30 percent of their household income on transportation to get where they need to go. The average American spends only 13 percent. In my neighborhood, Columbia Heights in the heart of Washington DC, the average household spends 8 percent on transportation due to the close proximity of destinations (like groceries, clinics, schools, restaurants, and retail), the general walkability, and the access to multiple bus lines and rail.

That lack of access to transit and safe walking or biking routes requires people to stretch financially to buy cars, an expensive asset that loses value the moment you buy it, rather than use that money for education, property or retirement. We aren't just talking about a household that might want to be car-free. It is a system that requires a household of 5 people to have 3-4 cars instead of 1-2. At \$8000 a year to operate a car, that is a heavy financial burden indeed.

Lack of access to a car or reliable transit can be a blockage to work itself. When I was in school in Baton Rouge, LA, I needed a job to help pay my bills. But I could not find a job that I could get to without a car and could not afford a car without a job. The message was clear: if I didn't have thousands to pay the cover charge to enter the US economy, my labor was not needed or particularly wanted. What a ridiculous and inefficient notion — but it is a message we send to millions every day in this country.

Again this is a problem we associate with urban America. Yet according to the latest American Community Survey, the majority of counties with high rates of zero-car households (10 percent or more) [are rural](#). In fact, more than *one million* households in predominantly rural counties do not have access to a vehicle. Rural Americans without cars face unique barriers and they deserve a tailored approach to their transit needs rather than just assuming they can or will drive everywhere.

COVID has caused many to lose work, and people are struggling to pay rent, mortgages and car payments. As the economic recovery begins, the number of transit dependent people who we want to help to get back to work will likely only rise. High quality transit will be an important part of ensuring that everyone gets back to work.

COVID also pointed to the folly of our approach to transportation in general. While work trips made up approximately 20 percent of people's trips before the pandemic, nearly all of our focus in transportation was on that 20 percent of trips and those alone. Neither our roadways nor transit is designed to help people get to things like the grocery, school or medical care. Short trips of a few blocks are often too dangerous on foot, whether to the store or to the bus. And transit lines point to downtowns and job centers, not necessarily neighborhood centers.

Retooling to address non-work trips will require data and resources. Congress could play an important role in both the transit and highway programs by bringing those resources and accountability for transit and highway agencies to serve the 80 percent of non-work trips. We focus on traffic during rush hour, and this is certainly inconvenient. But it is nowhere near the stress and challenge faced by the parent without access to a reliable car who needs not just to get to work but to drop off and pick up kids from school and drop by the grocery.

The good news is we have ways to truly measure how well our system performs in terms of getting people where they need to go, whether they have access to a car or not. My partners at the [State Smart Transportation Institute](#) have published a guide to using GIS and the cloud to compute all potential trips by all modes from homes to jobs and other essential destinations (like groceries, banks, schools and health care). This analysis can be used to measure performance, identify neighborhoods cut off by infrastructure, areas that need transit, and more. It can also be used to evaluate proposed projects on whether they improve that access. The Commonwealth of Virginia has used this approach as part of their [Smart Scale](#) system for years now to determine which projects to prioritize for funding.

Today, instead of using this approach, most transit and highway projects are evaluated using the speed of travel as a proxy for time saved. In transit, it is looked at for the end-to-end user of a line, something few customers do. In highways, it is looked at in terms of travel between two observed points. Neither approach measures anyone's trip from door to door nor whether anyone actually arrives anywhere.

This is another way Congress could play an important role in the next reauthorization. Provide access to the data and tools now available to consider how we can give people, particularly those struggling financially, access to work and essential services by all modes of travel. The Senate bill last Congress provided a pilot for measuring multimodal access. The House bill created a new performance measure. This year, these data could help transit (as well as highway) agencies plan a more holistic transportation system that is equally designed for the 80 percent of nonwork trips and the 20 percent of work trips (which will likely fall). They can also plan for all people whether they travel by car, transit, foot, bike, scooter or wheelchair.

Long before COVID, our transportation system created problems in air quality, climate emissions, water quality, heat island effect and more. None of these issues are fully addressed by electrifying vehicles; neither are the inequities or safety problems with the existing program. Let me be clear: electrification is essential and is something Transportation for America supports completely. In fact, we recently helped launch a new coalition called [CHARGE](#) that calls for strengthening and growing public transit while rapidly transitioning to electric fleets.

But while electrification is essential, it is insufficient to address climate. In our report [Driving Down Emissions](#), we cite several states that have found they need to electrify vehicles **and** allow people to use cars less to reach their climate goals. California has found that even if the state meets its ambitious target of 15 percent zero emissions vehicles on the road by 2030, people would still need to drive 4.5 fewer miles per day to reach the state's 2030 climate target. Within Minnesota, even assuming a 65 percent onroad EV adoption rate in 2050, Minneapolis needs to reduce driving by 38 percent to meet an 80 percent carbon reduction goal. This is where transit and making roads safer so that people can get to transit becomes so essential.

Finally, it is time to develop a targeted rural transit program. As the Director of the Oklahoma Transit Association Mark Nestlen said in a recent [Vice article](#): Congress never sat down at the table and said 'let's develop a rural transit program. What should it look like?' They sat down at a table and said, 'here's the urban transit program...we're going to have everything be the same and just put it in rural.' When you do that, you're going to put a square peg into a round hole.

Last month, Canada's Minister of Infrastructure and Communities and the Minister for Rural Economic Development announced a Rural Transit Fund, which will provide \$250 million over 5 years to help address the transit needs of those living in rural, remote and small communities. Last fall, the State of Oklahoma developed a statewide [plan for public transportation](#) that unites urban and rural transit services by laying out mobility priorities for the next 20 years. The plan received input from transit providers across the state and focuses on overall mobility priorities and goals for improving transit service and connectivity. This is the kind of approach to rural transit needed to connect rural Americans to jobs and essential services across the country.

Transit is a major and essential part of reaching our goals for economic recovery, economic opportunity, climate and racial equity. And the country requires a major investment in transit to accomplish these goals – the kind of commitment we made to highways starting in the 1950s. To support this, there are three things to consider in the next reauthorization bill:

- **Refocus the federal transit program to improve transit frequency, reliability, and ridership and expand access to jobs and services in both urban and rural areas.** The traditional metrics used to measure a transit system's performance, such as costs per traveler trip or mile, on-time performance, and ridership, do not capture transit's true value to riders and local economies. Transit projects should be evaluated based on how well they get people to the places they need to go, measured through multimodal access. The things that factor into this access are service frequency and reliability; safe access to transit stops; and transit that serves work and nonwork trips alike.
- **Fund transit operations in addition to capital projects.** As revenue from fares and local tax measures evaporated virtually overnight, the pandemic demonstrated the need for a stable source of funding for transit service in emergencies. Congress came through. Long-term federal support for transit operations – particularly for greater frequencies, expanded hours and new service – will help agencies deliver the high quality, safe, and affordable public transit service urban and rural Americans need and deserve.
- **Rebalance transit funding to match funding for highways.** For nearly 40 years, we have stuck to a deal that was made during the Reagan Administration to bring transit into the surface transportation program. At the time, the gas tax paid for the whole program, something that has not been true in over a decade. To make a highway level commitment to providing Americans in large cities, small cities and rural towns alike, it will require a similar funding commitment.

Communities are constantly changing. COVID has caused even more. It is time that we harness that change to make our transportation

system more efficient, affordable, equitable and accessible for everyone.