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Statement of John Robert Smith on the Passing of Transportation Champion U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ)

(June 3, 2013) Today, transportation generally and passenger rail in particular, lost a dear friend and valiant advocate with the passing of New Jersey U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg.

Of the many trusted relationships I have formed through my work in transportation, my association with Sen. Lautenberg is one of the most highly valued. As the mayor of my hometown of Meridian, Miss., I worked closely with Sen. Trent Lott in the support of a national passenger rail network linking America's cities and towns, large and small. It was in the thick of that effort that I got to know Sen. Lautenberg and first realized the strength of that national system, which served both small town Mississippi and the rural South, and metropolitan New Jersey and the densely populated Northeast.

It was my good fortune to work with two statesmen, one a conservative Republican from Mississippi, the other a liberal Democrat from New Jersey, who did not let party affiliation or geographic differences stand in the way of crafting legislation to support an interconnected passenger rail network that served their diverse regions and the greater nation as well. Such public servants are desperately needed even now.

I worked more closely with Sen. Lautenberg as a member and later chairman of the Amtrak Board of Directors as we began operation of the senator's much loved Acela, serving DC, New York and Boston and the vibrant cities in between. I rode the rails with the senator several times, including the congressional trip to New York City shortly after Sept. 11, 2001, to share the nation's support, solidarity and resilience with the people of New York City.

Whenever in Sen. Lautenberg's presence he always engaged me about the continued importance of rail service in the South. It pleased me that Frank Lautenberg acknowledged that region's connectivity as being of value to the nation as a whole.

I found him to be gracious, considerate, honestly motivated and without reserve a believer in the strength of our nation and the transportation infrastructure that binds us together.

His value to his country will be sorely missed by this Republican from Mississippi.

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Reconnecting America is a national nonprofit that is helping to transform promising ideas into thriving communities - where transportation choices make it easy to get from place to place, where businesses flourish, and where people from all walks of life can afford to live, work and visit. Reconnecting America is the managing partner of the Center for Transit-Oriented Development, the only national nonprofit effort funded by Congress to promote best practices in transit-oriented development. Reconnecting America is also a founding partner of Transportation for America, a broad coalition of housing, environmental, equal opportunity, public health, urban planning, transportation and other organizations focused on creating a 21st century national transportation program. For more information visit our website, www.reconnectingamerica.org.