

Oral Testimony of the Transportation for America Coalition
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Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
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Chairman Duncan, Ranking Member DeFazio, and esteemed members of the subcommittee, I am John Robert Smith, a founding partner and co-chair of the Transportation for America Coalition and President and CEO of Reconnecting America. On behalf of Transportation for America, I would like to thank the Committee for holding this hearing on improving and reforming the nation's surface transportation programs.

Before I came to Washington almost two years ago, I was a former 16-year Republican mayor in my hometown of Meridian, Mississippi. Meridian is a small city of 40,000 that serves as a regional draw for 11 counties. As Mayor, I witnessed firsthand the transportation challenges facing those who live in small towns and rural America.

It may come as a surprise to some, but Americans who live in small towns have the same transportation needs as those that live in big cities. They need access to their jobs, healthcare, education and services. Long commutes, rising gas prices, and shifting demographics all impact the prosperity of these communities and the people that live in them. Regional, intermodal transportation connections are critical. Many small towns and rural areas lack the financial resources, planning capacity, or authority to implement solutions to their transportation needs. A bold new policy is needed at the federal level with significant input from the state and local levels to meet those needs.

Transportation for America does recognize it is important to fix America's crumbling transportation infrastructure. We are, in fact, today releasing a report on the state of disrepair of our nation's bridges. Mr. Chairman, in your district there were bridges in disrepair in Loudon, McMinn, Monroe and Blount Counties – in fact we found 8 in Blount County. There are more than 450,000 rural bridges and almost half have been found to be structurally deficient.¹

In addition to repairing our nation's infrastructure, we need to focus on transportation options that provide choices for people in this era of rising gas prices. Many aging baby boomers and veterans in small towns and rural areas depend on public transit to see the doctor or go to the grocery store. Working parents need to get to their jobs, get their children from daycare and complete their errands in a timely manner. And college students need access to local higher ed institutions and their part-time jobs they hold down as well.

Additionally, there is the quality of life that transit options provide. When I came to Washington, D.C. almost two years ago, I realized as I heard this new word, livability,

that that was just what we were doing in Meridian. The transit connections and ensuing economic development that occurred in my sixteen years as Mayor were empowering people to make decisions without being hindered by distance and gas prices. You can put whatever label on it you want – but people should be able to live where they want to live, work where they want to work, and get there in a cost-efficient and timely manner.

Providing transit options not only provides a better quality-of-life for people, it leads to increased investment in towns that often are on the downslide. I saw this firsthand in Meridian. A public-private investment turned our historic train station into the South's first multimodal transportation center and proved to be a catalyst for transforming our main street, increasing public transportation ridership, and helping to generate millions of dollars in private economic development in the surrounding neighborhoods. Historic buildings were renovated, people came back downtown to both live and work, and also for entertainment and our city center was revived, not only for residents but also for those that lived in the surrounding 11 county region.

This has also been successful in other states, such as North Carolina. In Representative Coble's district, Greensboro has seen transit leading to adjoining development and re-development, much of which is residential. Salisbury has attracted significant retail to revitalize their downtown, and private funds for streetscape improvement and a park linking the historic station to the central downtown area.

Chairman Duncan, can you imagine if the congested area of Gatlinburg in the Smoky Mountains, had some transportation alternatives for visitors and conventioners, linking people to the sites and hotels in that area. That would be a huge step in relieving the traffic bottlenecks on US 441 and Highway 66.

To conclude, small cities and towns in rural states are part of a national transportation system and people that live in them have the same concerns as their neighbors in big cities. Investing in transportation choices in urban and rural areas will lead to a better quality of life for all Americans and increased economic development to benefit all our citizens. Thank you for allowing me to testify and I welcome any oral or written questions.

ⁱ Federal Highway Administration. (2004) "Planning for Transportation in Rural Areas." U.S. Department of Transportation. Washington, D.C.
www.fhwa.dot.gov/planning/rural/planningfortrans/index.html