

Written Testimony of Michael Comes at Night
Councilman of the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council for the Blackfeet Nation

Before the

House of Representatives, Committee on Appropriations,
Subcommittee on Interior, Environment, and Related Agencies

Wednesday, March 18, 2026

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak with you today regarding the need to adequately fund the Blackfeet Nation's Law Enforcement, Tribal Court, and Transportation Road Department.

My name is Michael Comes At Night, and I serve on the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council for the Blackfeet Nation in Montana. My testimony addresses how the federal government has failed to adequately fund Law Enforcement, Tribal Court, and Transportation Road Department for the Blackfeet Nation, and respectfully requests an increase in funding.

I. Law Enforcement

I am speaking today because public safety is something that affects every family across the great Blackfeet Nation. Many residents of the Blackfeet Nation, including elders and families with children, constantly worry about safety. Officers themselves often work long shifts with limited equipment and support. When a department is underfunded, it becomes harder to recruit and retain officers, maintain vehicles, provide training, and implement prevention programs that could reduce crime before it happens. We currently experience these problems firsthand as result of insufficient funding.

When it comes to retention, our officers are paid less than competing neighboring agencies, and we routinely lose officers due to the inability to pay competitive wages, health insurance, pension, and other benefits offered to first responders. This inability is a direct result of the lack of federal funding. Increased funding would allow Blackfeet Law Enforcement Services to pay competitive wages, provide first responder benefits, hire more officers, upgrade equipment, and provide additional training. These improvements directly translate to decreases in crime and increased public safety. It would also help strengthen partnerships between law enforcement and the community, including youth programs, crisis response resources, and victim support services. With adequate financial support, our officers can continue to protect our community and build a safer future for the next generation.

Currently, our law enforcement is severely underfunded, they are stretched too thin, and crime runs rampant in our community. Last year Blackfeet law enforcement responded to over 15,000 calls from across our Reservation, which covers a large geographic area -- 1.5 million acres -- and there are simply not enough officers or resources to meet the needs of our community. Often, response times are longer than acceptable, not because officers do not care, but because they are already responding to multiple calls or covering large patrol areas alone.

Moreover, there is a cartel presence on our Reservation, dealing dangerous drugs, and infecting our community. Many residents, including elders and families with children, worry about safety in their neighborhoods. The seriously safety concerns are directly related to the lack of federal fund. When a department is underfunded, it becomes harder to recruit and retain officers, maintain vehicles, provide training, and implement prevention programs that could reduce crime before it happens. The problems with our inability to adequately police our Reservation does not just impact our Blackfeet Nation and Tribal members. It creates a breeding ground for crime which ultimately spills from our borders into neighboring off-Reservation communities. Increased funding doesn't just help the Tribe, it helps our neighbors as well.

Public safety is not only about enforcement; it is about protecting our families, respecting our elders, and ensuring that our children grow up in safe communities. Supporting law enforcement on the Reservation means supporting the well-being of the entire nation, as well as neighboring communities. And right now, the federal government is not providing the support that is needed. For these reasons, I respectfully ask leaders and decision-makers to consider increased funding and resources for the officers who serve the people of the Blackfeet Nation every day. With the right support, they can continue to protect our community and build a safer future for the next generation.

II. Tribal Court

The Blackfeet Tribal Court plays a critical role in upholding justice, protecting community safety, and preserving the sovereignty of the Blackfeet Nation. As the primary judicial authority on the Reservation, the Tribal Court is responsible for adjudicating criminal, civil, family, and juvenile matters while ensuring that justice is delivered in a manner consistent with Blackfeet laws, traditions, and cultural values.

Despite the court's essential responsibilities, it faces significant resource constraints. Caseloads have steadily increased, however, funding levels have not kept pace with growing responsibilities, inflation, and the cost of living. Significantly, we cannot offer attractive compensation to law trained judges and attorneys to enforce the rule of law. This compounds the problems we face with inadequate law enforcement funding. Justice and the rule of law are something that all Americans should have access to. Currently, such access for the Blackfeet Nation's members is being frustrated because of woefully inadequate funding of our Tribal Court.

Limited resources strain court operations, delay case processing, and restrict the Court's ability to provide services such as probation supervision, juvenile detention, victim advocacy, and alternative dispute resolution. For instance, the Tribal Court budget only allows for prosecutors to be paid \$16.00 per hour. How many prosecutors do you know that would prosecute crimes on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation for \$16.00 per hour? And there are over 4,000 pending criminal cases since 2018. Additional funding would allow the Blackfeet Tribal Court to expand judicial capacity by hiring law trained judges, more clerks, and experienced prosecutors and defenders, and address the severe backlog of both civil and criminal cases. It would also support modernization efforts, including case management systems, digital recordkeeping, and improved courtroom facilities. Currently, there is only one courtroom that serves all criminal, civil, family and juvenile matters, with over 600 hearings annually. This compounds the Court's backlog as

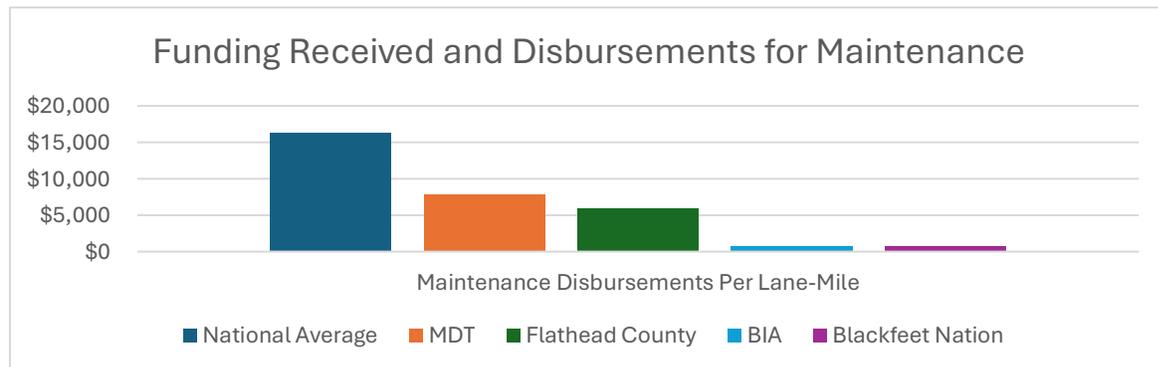
only one case can be heard at one time. If there was increased funding, an additional courtroom could be added so multiple cases could be heard at once.

The federal government – with a trust responsibility for funding tribal justice systems – has historically provided far less money than needed. Combined with jurisdiction complications and limited tribal revenue, this leaves the system with too few officers, prosecutors, and court staff to handle the workload. We desperately need more funding for the tribal court and law enforcement to properly administer the tribal justice systems on the Blackfeet Reservation. With the Tribe’s increased ability to ensure the rule of law comes decreased need for federal support to administer justice within the Reservation. This ultimately reduces any fiscal impacts that result from the United States fulfilling our desperate financial need.

III. Transportation

The Blackfeet Transportation Department is severely underfunded. In 2025, the Blackfeet Nation received \$623,652.85 in Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) Tribal Priority Allocation (TPA) funds for road maintenance from the Department of the Interior. Spread across the 763.2 lane-miles of BIA owned roads, this equates to \$817.16 per lane-mile annually. The Blackfeet Tribal Transportation Program (TTP) supplements road maintenance activities with their construction share dollars at \$450,000.00 annually. The TTP must adhere to specific spending limits for maintenance activities which is capped at up to 25% or \$500,000 whichever is greater, of the Tribe’s total fiscal year TTP allocation. Spread across the 669.2 lane-miles of Tribally owned roads, this equates to \$672.44 per lane-mile annually. Combined, this equals \$1,073,652.85 spread over a total of 1,432.4 miles for an average of nearly \$750 per lane-mile for both BIA and Tribally owned roads.

For context, the Montana Department of Transportation (MDT) spends approximately \$7,884 per lane-mile adjusted for inflation to FY2025 which is leveraged from multiple funding sources. Flathead County, a neighboring district, spends on average around \$10,000,000 each year received from tax dollars for the 1,672 lane-miles of road they maintain, or approximately \$5,981 per lane mile. This comparison illustrates that the Blackfeet Nation operates on 8 to 11 times less funding per mile than state or county governments, leaving BIA and Tribal roads in serious disrepair. MDT estimates that for every \$1 spent preserving roads, MDT saves roughly \$4 to \$8 in costly repair. BIA’s own officials have noted that the Blackfeet Nation would require \$600,000 per quarter—not per year—just to address deferred maintenance on BIA owned roads.



The insufficient funding has created serious deferred maintenance and safety issues. For example, BIA Route 1, a top-priority rural route, has poor pavement conditions and a documented history of fatal crashes. TTP has invested funds for design to bring BIA Route 1 up to today's safety standards and the cost to improve Phase 1, 2, 4 and 6 being estimated at \$61,085,313. Phases 3 and 5 of the proposed BIA Route 1 improvement projects require roadway realignments with new bridges and will be considerably more expensive. Even if the TTP were to spend all of their yearly allocation dollars (omitting any kind of program administration, planning, and road maintenance duties), it would take approximately 14 years to complete only 66% of the needed road improvements on just BIA Route 1. Addressing this corridor comprehensively with TTP funds alone would therefore take decades, even before considering other roads on the Reservation.

The Blackfeet Nation has to allocate construction funds for ongoing maintenance activities as well as planning and program administration, which is \$1,077,000, or 24.3% of their yearly TTP share dollars, leaving even less resources for reconstruction, upgrades, and safety improvements. The Tribe's Long-Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) identifies nearly \$100 million in short, medium, and long-range projects: Short-range projects \$12,876,586, Medium-range projects \$25,676,162, Long-range projects \$61,315,272. TTP share dollars are derived from a funding formula based primarily on historical data with current population data, which causes a disadvantage for the Blackfeet Tribe with a lower population, but extensive roadway networks receiving less funding per lane-mile compared to smaller Tribes with higher populations. Even with additional competitive grants from programs like RAISE or FHWA safety funds, the gap between funding and actual need remains significant. These grants, while helpful, are project-specific and cannot replace the stable, ongoing funding needed to maintain and improve the Reservation's road system, which is in deplorable and unsafe condition.

Federal road maintenance allocations are based on historical funding levels, not current needs. The Tribe has no control over BIA road maintenance decisions, which are often determined by discretionary policies rather than the actual condition of roads or safety needs. **As a result, the Tribe is effectively subsidizing a federal program that is supposed to maintain roads on Tribal land, while still struggling to meet the basic transportation needs of its residents.**

The data clearly shows the Blackfeet Nation's roads are chronically underfunded, with insufficient dollars per mile to maintain safety, accessibility, or long-term infrastructure integrity. Without increased funding, including for both maintenance and critical corridor improvements, Tribal roads will continue to deteriorate, compromising public safety, economic development, and Tribal sovereignty. Increased funding doesn't just support the Blackfeet Nation's membership, it increases safety for all people who visit our Reservation. The Blackfeet Nation provides direct access to Glacier National Park, which is visited by millions annually. We want to keep our members and guests safe on our failing roads. We ask for this support not just for the Blackfeet Nation, but for our friends, neighbors, guests as well.

In closing, it is clear that the federal government has failed uphold its trust responsibility to adequately fund Law Enforcement, Tribal Court, and Transportation Road Maintenance, on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation. On behalf of the Blackfeet Nation, I respectfully request federal funding increase in these critical areas to improve public safety on the Blackfeet Reservation.