

Congress of the United States
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Testimony submitted by: Congresswoman Stacey E. Plaskett (VI)

Thank you Chairman Diaz-Balart, Ranking Member Price, for the opportunity to testify on appropriations for the Departments of Transportation and Housing and Urban Development over the next fiscal year. This legislation will serve as a statement of the commitment from the federal government to address some of our most pressing local needs in the U.S. Virgin Islands.

In the United States territories, there are nearly 4 million Americans, and we are too often left out of important programs or underfunded compared to benefits available to Americans living on the mainland United States. For example in the U.S. Virgin Islands, despite benefits we bring to the United States including enormous tourism commerce from airline visits, cruise ships and other vessels, federal transportation funding to the Islands falls behind other jurisdictions even though the traffic straining our infrastructure is often much greater due to the high number of visitors year-round.

Territorial roads continue to be under stress from inadequate capacity, and in the Virgin Islands, most of the federal highways do not meet current standards. Because the territories are islands, much of the road construction is more expensive than on the mainland to accommodate supplier costs. As a result of inadequate funds, crucial projects have been shelved, leaving only stopgap repairs to resolve maintenance issues, even on primary arterial highways.

I would like to emphasize that this negatively impacts *everything* from commerce, to disaster relief management, to emergency response and law enforcement capabilities. Extreme weather during hurricane season annually demonstrates how fragile our infrastructure is and how much we depend on it.

The territories are generally less well off economically than the states due to a lower per capita domestic product, and we pay higher prices for many necessities. We do not have local revenue means to provide for needed highway infrastructure without adequate federal assistance.

Although the goal of bringing the territories into economic parity with the states has been a principle embraced by several Acts of Congress over decades of partnership work, this has yet to be fulfilled in the area of transportation infrastructure. Each of the territories were acquired for specific strategic purposes, and we continue to be of vibrant strategic value to the United States.

Accordingly, I request full funding at or above current authorization levels for the Territorial Highway Program over the next fiscal year. I also join others in calling for enhanced funding for TIGER grants over the next fiscal year, preferably at or above the fiscal 2017 requested level of \$1.25 billion.

I also welcome recent statements from leaders in Congress on both sides of the aisle for new, supplemental transportation and infrastructure programs, and the decision by the President for this to be part of his agenda.

If and when this committee will be working with the authorizing committees on any new transport expenditure programs, it is imperative that the territories be fully incorporated into the package. New infrastructure projects in the Virgin Islands will create much needed, immediate jobs, as well as help to promote safety and security in an economy that is heavily based upon tourism. There are numerous examples of needs we have that are out of our reach right now due to current levels of funding but which could be covered with new or supplemental assistance.

In addition, investment in airports and continued pressure on airlift is critical to a place like the Virgin Islands, and I urge that any new discretionary program reforms expand eligibility and funding for the Airport Improvement Program, which has been crucial to the much-needed modernization of Cyril King Airport on Saint Thomas. We also depend on well-functioning maritime infrastructure, and I will be seeking fair inclusion of the Virgin Islands in the National Highway System and Federal Transit Administration ferry programs to assist in the purchase of necessary vessels to accommodate heightened transit demand along the route from Saint Thomas to Saint Croix.

I also strongly support the inclusion of school construction and broadband expansion programs in any new infrastructure-funding package. Many of the people living in the Virgin Islands do not have ordinary access to a computer connected to the internet, and this continues to have negative impact on educational opportunities and workforce development to grow our economy.

Lastly, I would like to touch on housing-related programs, which serve as critical anti-poverty tools for lower-income people. Greater investments in HOME and CDBG block grants, and Section 8 rental assistance, are critical for the availability of safe, decent, and affordable housing in the Virgin Islands. These resources are especially important amid higher costs facing my constituents and communities across our country, and I urge that they be strengthened over the next fiscal year.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present my testimony today.