

Congress of the United States  
House of Representatives  
Washington, DC 20515-1317

May 2, 2019

The Honorable Greg Walden  
Ranking Member  
U.S. House Committee on Energy & Commerce  
2322 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington D.C. 20515

The Honorable Frank Pallone, Jr.  
Chairman  
U.S. House Committee on Energy & Commerce  
2125 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member Walden:

As Congress begins work on an infrastructure bill, I would like to share my top priorities for inclusion in any comprehensive proposal, elements of which fall under your Committee's jurisdiction. Enclosed, you will find a document outlining programs and investments that are crucial to rebuilding and restoring our infrastructure, especially in rural areas and small towns. My parents' generation left us a world-class infrastructure system, and I look forward to working with you on these important initiatives to meet that promise for generations to come.

Thank you for your leadership in crafting this important bill, and for your consideration of these programs. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me or my staff at 5-5905.

Respectfully,



Cheri Bustos,  
Member of Congress



There is bipartisan consensus that the United States needs significant investment in our infrastructure to build a strong foundation for a successful economy. This is particularly true in the Heartland, where road, water infrastructure, broadband and community facility investments are needed. These investments would support local businesses, help get goods to market and improve quality of life all while creating good-paying jobs. We can make these investments in a fiscally responsible manner.

To realize the benefits of an infrastructure proposal in all parts of the country, any proposal should:

- 1) Direct federal investment to areas with demonstrated need
- 2) Strengthen programs that target support to rural areas and small towns, including technical assistance
- 3) Maintain and expand policies that support America's manufacturers and workers, including Buy American, Davis-Bacon prevailing wage requirements and the use of project labor agreements

### **Locks and Dams**

More than 600 million tons of goods are shipped along our inland waterway system annually. But most locks and dams have far exceeded their designed lifespan, and the failure of a single lock could shut down traffic up and down the river system. By increasing federal support to the existing public-private partnership – the Inland Waterway Trust Fund – we can:

- Prioritize funding the \$8.75 billion backlog of inland waterway projects
- Fund the Navigation and Ecosystem Sustainability Program and upgrade to 1200' locks on the Upper Mississippi River

### **Water**

Clean drinking water and safe wastewater disposal are requirements for communities of any size, but maintaining the necessary infrastructure can be a significant financial burden for small communities. More than 94% of drinking water utilities in the United States supply communities smaller than 10,000 people, and the EPA projects \$655 billion in water infrastructure needs nationwide over the next 20 years. The need to eliminate lead exposure through drinking water is only adding to the demand for federal resources. We can help address the needs of rural communities and small towns if we:

- Fund the USDA Water and Waste Water program's \$2.5 billion project backlog
- Reauthorize and boost funding for the EPA's Clean Water and Drinking Water State Revolving Funds

### **Broadband**

Access to high-speed internet is a necessity for today's students, families, farmers and businesses. But 23 million rural Americans don't have access to internet of adequate speed. Right now, the United States is ranked 16<sup>th</sup> in the world in terms of broadband access. To help change that, the federal government can:

- Provide sufficient direct support for programs to close the "last mile" gap and deploy sustainable broadband that will meet rural consumers' needs now and in the future
- Encourage local officials to "dig once" to upgrade broadband as they build and repair roads

### **Health Care**

Hospitals are the economic drivers of many rural communities, employing an average of 195 people with a payroll of \$8.4 million. Yet nearly 700 rural hospitals are at risk of closure, putting 236,000 jobs on the line. Hospital closures have devastating impacts on rural economies and feed health disparities between rural and urban residents. Not only do rural residents tend to be older and sicker, they often have to travel further for care and only one-tenth of the nation's physicians practice in rural areas. To support rural economies and improve access to care, we must:

- Improve access to capital for health facilities' construction and modernization, such as purchasing new equipment to promote telehealth
- Test new ways to deliver care that will allow hospitals in small towns and rural areas to keep their doors open without compromising patients' access to critical health services
- Make investments to recruit physicians and other health professionals to practice in rural areas
- Fund the backlog of construction and maintenance at Department of Veterans Affairs medical facilities

## **Roads and Bridges**

More than seven of every ten miles of public roads and bridges across America are in rural areas, and travel on these roads is increasing. Everyday use and freight traffic has resulted in growing maintenance needs. In 2015, more than 35% of major rural roads across the country were rated in poor or mediocre condition. To boost local economies and promote public safety, the federal government should:

- Provide a sustainable funding source for the Highway Trust Fund
- Provide robust funding for the BUILD grant program
- Continue safety investments for improvements to High Risk Rural Roads

## **Airports**

America's non-hub airports help spur investment in our local economies, but these airports have critical maintenance and infrastructure needs. The Federal Aviation Administration estimates that over the next five years, \$32.5 billion in airport projects will be eligible for federal Airport Improvement Program funds nationwide, while far less funding will be available. To address these needs, the federal government should:

- Support funding for airport infrastructure projects, including the Airport Improvement Program
- Maintain the Essential Air Service program that preserves access to smaller airports in rural areas

## **Rail**

An efficient rail network is important for the transport of goods through rural areas and the success of passenger rail. However, federal investments in passenger rail infrastructure have lagged behind even while ridership on long-distance passenger rail routes that serve the Heartland is growing. These routes stop in many rural communities without commercial airports or other intercity transportation. To invest in rural rail, we must:

- Fund passenger rail investments, including long-distance service, the Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvement Program and Restoration and Enhancement Grants
- Continue incentives for maintaining freight rail infrastructure
- Extend the short line "45G" rehabilitation tax credit

## **Energy**

Connecting rural customers to stable and cost-effective electricity – and harnessing the energy that's generated in rural areas – remains a challenge today. Nationwide, our economy loses more than \$25 billion annually due to avoidable power failures. To bring our energy generation and electricity into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, an infrastructure plan should:

- Support Rural Utility Service loan programs that help accelerate grid modernization and protection
- Maintain incentives for energy sources like wind, solar and biofuels that promote our energy independence and strengthen rural economies

## **Education and Research**

Beyond their role in education, rural schools are also major employers and community centers. But while four in every ten American students attend rural schools, those schools receive less than a quarter of federal education funding. Nationwide, America's schools need repairs, renovations and modernizations totaling nearly \$200 million. In addition, the Association of Public and Land-grant Universities identified \$8.4 billion in deferred maintenance for buildings and infrastructure used for agricultural research. To help rural America compete, we should:

- Invest in improvements to rural K-12 facilities
- Invest in agricultural research capacity, including those that fund facilities improvements

## **Housing and Community Facilities**

Housing affordability is a growing concern for rural communities. Since 2000, housing costs in rural areas have increased five percent and one in four rural households pays more than 30% of their income on housing. Further, compared with the typical urban unit, housing in non-metro areas is two times more likely to have incomplete plumbing, inadequate wastewater treatment or unsafe drinking water. In addition, too many communities struggle to adequately support first responders' infrastructure needs to keep their communities safe. To bolster rural communities, we must:

- Support federal programs geared towards addressing housing and homelessness in rural areas, such as the USDA Section 502 Single Family Housing Direct and Guaranteed Loan Programs and Multi-Family Housing Programs
- Bolster programs at USDA, EPA and HUD to address public health concerns posed by unsafe conditions in housing
- Increase support for USDA's Community Facility grant programs to help support first responders and other community facilities