

CONGRESSWOMAN MIKIE SHERRILL
Member Testimony
T&I Full Committee Hearing
“Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Members’
Day Hearing”

10:00AM May 1, 2019
2167 Rayburn House Office Building

Chairman DeFazio will recognize you for 5 minutes

Thank you, Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to testify today. I want to particularly recognize my New Jersey colleagues, Rep. Sires, Rep. Payne, and Rep. Malinowski, who work so hard to advance New Jersey’s priorities as members of this committee.

I’m glad to see yesterday the President and Speaker Pelosi met to talk about infrastructure, and agreed on moving forward on a \$2 trillion infrastructure package. A couple of weeks ago I had the opportunity to convey to the Speaker how important the Gateway Tunnel project is in particular, and that’s why I’m here today.

In fact, a good starting point for the administration would be to release the funds already appropriated to the Gateway Tunnel Project so we can immediately get started on this critical priority.

The Gateway Tunnel Project is the nation's most urgent infrastructure project.

As the members from New Jersey and New York on the committee know all too well, 20,000 commuters use the century-old Hudson River Tunnel to travel in and out of New York each day. It is the lynchpin of the passenger rail network: the most heavily-trafficked rail corridor, connecting train routes in 20 states.

Superstorm Sandy badly damaged the existing tunnel. I toured the damage a few months ago -- the brackish water that tore through the tunnel has left behind exposed rebar, corroded wires, and crumbling walls. Maintenance crews – and I must emphasize maintenance, because they are unable to do more than basic upkeep – can only operate for a few hours a night, hauling their equipment in and out of the tunnel for each triage session.

I know the committee has focused on the cost of doing nothing to invest in our crumbling infrastructure. Well, the cost of doing

nothing to address the poor condition of the current tunnel is staggering.

A complete collapse of the tunnel could injure thousands and cost our economy an estimated \$100 million a day.

I recently hosted a discussion with the Regional Plan Association on their new report on the Hudson River Tunnel. A planned closure of half the tunnel would be a \$16 billion hit to the national economy over four years. A \$22 billion hit to residential property values in New Jersey. Rising air fares, more pollution, longer commutes, and increased motor vehicle accidents will further harm the single most economically productive region in our country.

Just as important to my constituents, every deferred decision on the Gateway Project means mounting delays on the current system. It seems as though every few months, we read about a train stopped in the tunnel -- or in one case in October 2018, overhead power cables *puncturing* the top of a train car, stranding 1,600 commuters.

As a working parent, I know the stress of a delayed train when you are racing to pick up your kids at daycare, or make it home to watch a lacrosse game. I am on text chains with moms in my community

who have been stranded, feverishly working to find someone to pick their kids.

Ryan Coakley, a regular commuter from Montclair, described his commute as “a picture of inefficiency.” Packed trains, constant delays, and a stressful commute for folks who already have stressful jobs. He said that in order to coach his kid’s team, he has to take a half day from work because he can never depend on trains being on time.

Or Michael Preston, who has commuted into the city from Madison for 15 years. He compared riding the train to “death by a thousand cuts.” He now leaves two trains earlier than years before, because he knows if he needs to be to a meeting on time, he just can’t count on the system to get him there.

We are also approaching a new crisis with a shortage of train engineers for NJ Transit. The eight locomotive engineers graduating from training this May are not enough to fill the shortage we face. This workforce gap leaves our transit system operating well below capacity going into the busy summer months. In fact, it’s already been dubbed “Another Summer of Hell.”

We are better than this. There's no reason for transit agencies to struggle to maintain the workforce to keep the trains running on time. I look forward to working with this committee to help explore how the Federal Transit Administration can provide greater assistance for recruiting and training to fix these workforce shortages.

And if we truly want to build a 21st century infrastructure, we have to partner with Amtrak to reduce the backlog of projects along the Northeast Corridor. The greatest barrier to a strong passenger rail national network is the lack of investment. That is why I was proud to partner with members of this Committee to advocate for funding the Federal-State Partnership for a State of Good Repair.

But that's not enough. We must go beyond that and create a dedicated funding source for passenger rail projects and provide Amtrak contracting authority to advance the work that we all know needs to be done.

New Jersey sends more money to Washington in federal tax dollars, and gets back less, than almost any other state. My constituents do not feel Congress is working for them, because common sense things

like this tunnel, or rail maintenance, are put on ice because of partisan politics.

Nothing affects people's lives who go in and out of New York more than their commute. It is unavoidable, it must be done every day.

We owe the hard working men and women of our region a safe, reliable commute home.

We have a tremendous opportunity to greenlight the funding for the new tunnel. I look forward to joining you, Chairman DeFazio, and members of this committee on Thursday and Friday to tour the Hudson River Tunnel and move forward on Gateway. We owe the American people no less.