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Speech: Transportation and Infrastructure Priorities

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Chairman DeFazio, thank you for inviting me to share my thoughts with you as the committee works to reauthorize surface transportation programs and pass President Biden's American Jobs Plan.

My home state of Rhode Island ranks 49th in the nation for infrastructure conditions and has the highest rate of structurally deficient bridges in the country. These challenges present an urgent need to repair and rebuild our roads, bridges, ports, and transit systems to create jobs, invest in local economies, and enhance the safety of our citizens.

As you continue to develop legislation to address our transportation and infrastructure needs, it is my hope that you will consider including the following priorities.

First, studies have found that use of innovative materials is cost effective and provides long lasting durability when compared to conventional materials. I introduced the IMAGINE Act, which would encourage research and deployment of innovative construction materials in transportation projects nationwide.

Investing in new techniques and materials could help extend the life of critical public works that draw increasingly poor condition ratings. I urge the committee to support this bipartisan and bicameral solution to our nation's infrastructure needs.

Second, 4.1 million Americans are served by sewage treatment plants that provide less than secondary treatment, a basic requirement by federal law.

Unfortunately, the financial burden to meet federal requirements often falls on state and local governments that cannot shoulder the cost of facility maintenance and upgrades. In fact, only 37% of the nation's infrastructure capital investment needs were met in 2019. This is unacceptable.

I urge the committee to establish a new grant program that specifically addresses the needs of wastewater infrastructure in financially distressed municipalities. All Americans should have access to safe and clean water.

Third, the National Scenic Byways Program brings economic development and tourism to communities by recognizing historic, scenic, and culturally important roads around the country. The passage of my bill, the Reviving America's Scenic Byways Act led to the designation of 49 new national scenic byways earlier this year.

I support \$55 million in funding for the program and the creation of a Quality Assistance Program to provide technical assistance and help designees continue to meet the criteria for the program.

Fourth, I recently introduced legislation that will further support the activities laid out in President Biden's American Jobs Plan throughout Southern New England.

The Southern New England Regional Commission Act would allow communities in Rhode Island, Massachusetts, and Connecticut to utilize federal resources to invest in economic improvements through a number of areas such as defense and maritime manufacturing, and better utilize innovative materials in public transit programs.

With aging infrastructure and unemployment rates above the national average, these states urgently need the economic revitalization this commission will provide.

Not to be forgotten, our nations community centers need our support.

From senior centers to recreation facilities to organizations that offer programing for all-ages, community centers come in many forms.

However, they all provide Americans with opportunities to learn, socialize, and access key services. Congress should harness these engines of good by investing in facility acquisition and programing.

Finally, robust investments in coastal resiliency and broadband access will bring our nation's infrastructure into the 21st Century.

By 2050 rising sea levels will cause land currently occupied by 300 million people to flood at least once a year. We must build and retrofit infrastructure capable of withstanding the rising waters, more intense and more frequent storms brought on by climate change.

Internet access is essential complete homework, look for a job, and communicate with others. Yet, 44 million U.S. households do not have a standard broadband connection. Investments in high-speed broadband will end the isolation facing millions of disconnected Americans, create more jobs, and strengthen the economy.

We have the opportunity to pass once in a generation infrastructure packages that will stabilize and modernize the nation's economy and put millions of Americans to work. We must invest in innovative materials, expand access to clean water, support historic roads, address each region's unique needs, combat climate change, and expand access to broadband.

I thank you for your continued advocacy on these vital issues and appreciate your consideration. I look forward to working together.