

TESTIMONY
of
Representative Adriano Espaillat, New York's 13th Congressional District
to the
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
April 14, 2021

Thank you, Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the committee for allowing me this opportunity to testify about important items I believe should be addressed as you consider reauthorizing surface transportation programs. As a former member of this committee, and the only one representing New York City, there are a number of items I believe deserve consideration.

First and foremost, I want to thank the committee for including a number of my priorities in H.R. 2, the Moving Forward Act, last year. My *Transportation Alternatives Enhancements Act* is critical for encouraging projects to promote safe bike and pedestrian infrastructure, and together with the *Complete Streets Act* and the *SAFE Streets Act* will not only make our roads safe for all users but will direct us toward healthier, greener transportation infrastructure. All or portions of these bills were incorporated into H.R. 2, and I urge you to include them again. I also want to applaud the committee for including the new “gridlock” program to attack the plague of congestion in new, innovative ways. New York City is pioneering a congestion pricing and reduction program, the first of its kind in America, and believe this new program will serve to scale these innovative solutions in a way that improves our local and regional transportation systems and reduces the harmful emissions that have harmed air quality in minority communities like the ones I represent in Northern Manhattan and the Bronx.

Additionally, we must use infrastructure investment as a job-generating opportunity for underserved communities. Not only must we develop the pipeline of workers for 21st-century infrastructure projects, but we must also focus our training and hiring efforts in communities that have been historically left behind when these projects hit the ground. I would strongly support the inclusion of language in surface transportation legislation focused on generating partnerships between industry, state and local governments, and institutions of higher education or vocational training that target economically disadvantaged communities. For example, the City College of New York in my district has been working to develop a state-of-the-art infrastructure training institute with purpose-built curricula and on-the-job training initiatives. I believe this is a model that can be replicated throughout the country targeting communities of color, who are often underrepresented in the infrastructure workforce. In doing so, we can address not only issues of inequity but also a looping skills gap. I also recommend making changes in current Department of Transportation policies that will allow more women- and minority-owned businesses to participate in and contribute to federally financed infrastructure projects. I strongly believe that if we invest in training in diverse communities and promote policies that make projects accessible to a more diverse array of participants, we can create a cycle of success that will redound to the benefit of generations to come.

Mass transit is one of the most important areas in need of investment, not just in New York but throughout America. Regional and local public transportation systems are critical economic drivers that provide communities with access to jobs, education and training opportunities and services, as well as reduce our collective carbon footprint by taking cars off the road. Transit also facilitates growth for local businesses. According to the American Public Transportation Association, each dollar invested in public transportation creates four dollars in economic returns, from job creation to increased business sales. While the majority of this investment occurs at the state and local levels, the federal government provides key support that helps get needed projects off the ground. Programs like the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) Transportation Discretionary Grant program, the Capital Investment Grant program’s New Starts, Small Starts and Core Capacity grants and others accelerate community-changing projects in rural, suburban and urban areas alike, such as the Second Avenue Subway project in my district. As we reauthorize federal surface transportation programs, we must not only invest more in these key initiatives, but also seek to build upon and duplicate their success. We must also ensure these programs are carried in an effective and predictable manner so local transit agencies can carry out needed long-term planning. The previous administration made numerous, unexpected changes to financing requirements and often issued what appeared to be arbitrary, politically-motivated decisions. As we look to reauthorization, we should include policies that ensure a transparent and predictable process for these critical competitive grant programs.

Lastly, but just as important, is the need to review outdated federal formulas that govern the distribution of federal transportation dollars, particularly relating to transit. Many of our federal transportation formulas do not prioritize large, high-ridership systems, and in some cases it does not adequately reward those who are often doing the right thing, both by maintaining systems as best they can and by raising their own revenue to meet their challenges. For example, New York’s Metropolitan Transportation Authority has seen its share of these programs decline over the past decade, even as pre-COVID ridership has greatly increased. As a legacy system that serves millions of people per day, more than any other in the country, the MTA’s needs are unmatched, and while we do our part in New York to ensure the MTA gets the funding it needs, we very much believe it no longer receives the fair share that it deserves. I remain very grateful to the committee for its help in providing urgent COVID-19 relief to the MTA to address the short-term financial issues resulting from the pandemic, but I believe the committee must look to long-term changes that will ensure good actors in the public transit space can continue to meet the needs of the millions of Americans they serve.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to testify and for considering these priorities. I am also very grateful to you for taking the important step of allowing members to provide project-specific requests to the committee. This restoration of the “power of the purse” is a critical step to ensuring individual members can use their knowledge of their own districts to prioritize their constituents’ needs. I look forward to working with you on my requests as well as the important issues outlined above.

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