

Member Day Testimony of Congresswoman Gwen Moore
April 14, 2021
House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Chairman DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves,

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today about our nation's infrastructure priorities and the upcoming reauthorization of our highway and transit programs. As you know, President Biden's infrastructure and jobs plan details a number of important priorities to address transportation and infrastructure needs and put our citizens back to work.

I commend the President's ambitious proposal. As this Committee works on putting together the specifics of this package and the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization, I wanted to outline some priorities that should guide this work.

Equity

Workforce Development – Mr. Chairman and members of this Committee, I know you will receive much input and hear many concerns from members in this body. My hope is that in all discussion regarding the types of projects funded, the way that funding is allocated, and the people and workers involved in the construction of those projects, you hold equity as a guiding principle.

No one package can solve every problem, but by centering the needs of those most impacted, we can be sure that this package will not work against our goals of Building Back Better for everyone.

A priority of mine is making sure needed infrastructure investments promote equity throughout. I think it is important to note that the communities who suffer the most as a result of previous highway policies and aging transit and water infrastructure also face the highest levels of poverty and unemployment, and other forms of discrimination based on social status, race, and income level.

In the upcoming highway and transit reauthorization and any future infrastructure package, I request that you ensure that these investments create real and sustainable pathways for minority and underserved communities to work on projects funded through the bill. This must include directly tying transportation investments to the creation of jobs in the targeting communities, such as those laid out in Section 3 of the Housing and Urban Development Act of 1968. That provision requires that recipients of HUD funds, "to the greatest extent possible, provide job training, employment, and contract opportunities for low- or very-low income residents in connection with projects and activities in their neighborhoods." I recommend that a similar

provision be attached to highway, transit, and other infrastructure programs under the jurisdiction of this committee.

And when I say jobs, I mean job training, internships, mentorships, and apprenticeships, among others. We can work with stakeholders to make this happen.

I urge the Committee to take advantage of this opportunity. Not only can we help create and support better transportation investments, but also create real career pathways to good paying jobs that will create hope (and income) long after the last construction cone has gone away.

Environmental Justice – In the same vein, there are many ways that this package can address the myriad environmental injustices experience by minority and low-income communities.

Black and brown populations disproportionately depend on public transit to access employment opportunities and to meet the everyday transportation needs. Today, 38% of Black and Hispanic citizens say they take public transportation compared to just 7% of white people in the United States, according to a Pew Research Center survey.¹

Providing more substantial public transit funding is required to build equity into our nation's transportation options, and to support the communities who are already most vulnerable to the environmental and climate hazards this package aims to address.

In my city, over the last decade, public transit has seen service cuts and fare reductions that have hurt the most vulnerable the most while also making it harder to get to work, especially as work has moved outside the city center. We need a new highway bill that reverses this pattern of disinvestment to allow our local communities the ability to support viable and strong public transit networks, including to reach major employment centers.

Additionally, attention to environmental justice in this package would mean that all federally funded transportation projects not only center the needs of the communities they are impacting, but also adequately address any concerns they may have with the project. Meaningful engagement and ability to voice concerns on transportation projects has been a fallacy for many inner city and other communities that have often been pushed to the side whenever discussion about how to meet a community's transportation needs are brought up, even in the NEPA process.

Equity and environmental justice require this bill to give all communities a real voice in the transportation planning, project development, and alternatives development process. We should not use the guise of expediting projects to eliminate meaningful engagement of communities of color into these efforts. This bill should elevate engagement as a deliberate and intentional policy choice.

¹ Pew Research Center, Apr. 7, 2016, "Who relies on public transit in the U.S.," <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/07/who-relies-on-public-transit-in-the-u-s/>

I ask that this Committee focus your solutions through an Environmental Justice lens. We cannot afford for the solutions we embrace to perpetuate any further harm on those who have already suffered so much at the hands of racially blind and discriminatory infrastructure investments.

Milwaukee Priorities

In Milwaukee, we have many significant infrastructure needs that could benefit from the package this Committee produces.

Water Infrastructure – In addition to working with other relevant committees on replacing and repairing harmful lead piping and other aging drinking water infrastructure, matters about which we've already spoken Mr. Chairman, we also need greater investment in wastewater and stormwater management.

Milwaukee is facing increasingly frequent 500-year flooding events as both summer and winter storms increase in frequency due to Climate Change. These storms come at steep cost, not only to our public infrastructure, but also to our federal government as FEMA disaster loans are issued to help our citizens recover.

In January 2020, a winter storm caused more than \$4.1 million of damage at Port Milwaukee. This was on top of the \$3.1 million worth of damage caused by a Derecho on the Summer of 2019

Our waste and storm water management infrastructure, both man-made and green, must be maintained or, in most cases, improved to make Milwaukee more resilient to these extreme weather events.

Separately, as this Committee looks at funding highway projects, I also support the inclusion of "Dig Once" provisions that would require an assessment of the water and other infrastructure needs underneath the roadway being torn up. This would expedite the speed at which our infrastructure needs are addressed and ensure we do not double or triple the costs of projects by paving and reconstructing roadways unnecessarily.

Public Transit and Highways - Historically, public transit has been the stepchild of the highway trust fund with a historic split of 80/20% of trust fund revenues. In an era of equity, it's time we rethink that split and begin to ensure a more robust investment in public transportation. I hope the Committee will use this opportunity to address the need to update the funding split to expedite the pace at which we invest in historically underfunded public transportation projects.

In Milwaukee County, going to work or employment related activities are the number one reason cited for bus ridership.

Transit equity means not only maintaining existing highway infrastructure, which in many cases was built over and through minority communities, but also substantially, thoroughly, and aggressively funding the public transportation projects these communities desperately need to access gainful employment and live their everyday lives.

It also means rethinking the structure by which environmental impact studies are conducted for highway and transit projects to ensure these communities are not further harmed or displaced by these projects. In some cases, it may even mean tearing down highways as they are no longer needed. In all cases this must be done with full input from the affected community and ensure that all alternatives, including transit options, are really considered rather than just the need to check a box.

As this committee increases its investment in public transportation, greater funding is needed to support the adoption of electric buses and the related charging infrastructures to help us get to a cleaner fleet. Unfortunately, for local and state governments, such projects are cost prohibitive except for the largest providers. In the FAST Act, this committee took a step forward with a new competitive grant program to promote zero and low-emission buses and I urge the committee to strongly build on that foundation in the upcoming bill.

Lastly, in closing,

Among specific Milwaukee's priorities are:

- An expansion of our streetcar system, The Hop, which would provide greater connectivity to minority communities who were not connected during the system's original concept. Again, demonstrate the need for strong federal funding for transit so that localities can pursue opportunities such as the HOP.
- Support for bus rapid transit routes to provide improved service and shorter trip times to the communities in the center of Milwaukee County. Last year, the FTA signed off on the first bus rapid transit route in Wisconsin which begins in my district and connects to a major/health complex and employer in the near suburbs. These kinds of projects make sense and I know my community can benefit from additional such investments.
- Increased funding to protect transit operators. Assaults against these men and women continue and we need to do more to protect them.
- Increased funding to help overcome COVID-19 transit budget shortfalls due to lower ridership/fare collection. The committee should look at allowing larger transit operators to be able to use federal funding to support operating costs.

Electric Vehicles – Additionally, I know that the deployment of EV charging infrastructure is a major consideration in the upcoming bill. As this committee is developing policy to support this deployment, I would urge you to ensure that affordable and fast EV charging infrastructure, electric grid improvements, and battery recycling programs are distributed, not just equally, but also equitably, across all communities. Charging stations shouldn't skip zip codes or parts of town.

In a city as diverse and racially segregated as Milwaukee, we have seen how expanded access to new technologies can benefit the wealthy few at the top, while leaving the vulnerable many at the bottom.