

North America's Building Trades Unions

Statement of Brent Booker
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Subcommittee on Highways and Transit
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
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Hearing on
Building a 21st Century Infrastructure for America: Highways and Transit
Stakeholders' Perspectives

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Good morning. Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Norton, and distinguished members of this subcommittee:

My name is Brent Booker, Secretary-Treasurer of North America's Building Trades Unions (NABTU). On behalf of the nearly two million skilled craft construction professionals that I am proud to represent across the United States, I would like to thank you for allowing me to testify before this subcommittee.

Building America's infrastructure is literally what our members do every day. Whether it is roads and bridges, airports, waterways, power plants and other energy infrastructure, municipal water systems, public buildings, or skyscrapers, our members apply their unique skill sets to building infrastructure in every corner of our great nation.

The construction industry accounts for more than 8% of America's total gross domestic product, and no industry was hit harder by the Great Recession. For those of us in the construction industry, it was not a recession, it was a depression, and unemployment in our industry is just now returning to pre-recession levels. As the vast majority of construction firms are relatively small, local businesses, the strength or weakness of the construction industry has a significant impact on the economic health of communities across this great nation.

For many of our members, the strength of the construction industry, and the strength of their job opportunities, is directly tied to the strength of public policy in advancing the building of public infrastructure.

As such, I would like to thank the leadership of this subcommittee in helping move the most recent highway bill, the FAST Act. Highway bills, from a public investment standpoint, are the single largest job creating piece of legislation affecting our members. Furthermore, they provide certainty to our members that opportunities will be available for years to come.

While the FAST Act made important strides in improving our nation's surface transportation, I believe no one can argue that more can, and must be done to further repair our nation's infrastructure. As long as workers cannot commute rapidly from the suburbs into dense city centers, the nation's most dynamic labor markets will stagnate. As long as finished goods cannot be transported quickly to customers, shipping bottlenecks will impose drags on manufacturers. As long as more people are driving to work, the carrying capacity of the nation's roads will increasingly come under duress. And as long as projects are stalled, through either a lack of funding or other reasons, our members lose an opportunity to not only build, but to feed their families.

North America's Building Trades Unions believes a big, broad, bold infrastructure plan is the necessary step our country must take in order to solidify economic opportunities for workers and businesses across the United States. The question before this subcommittee, and the Congress as a whole, is what should such a plan include?

For our members, a big infrastructure plan will reflect the overall investment level consistently reiterated by President Trump of \$1 trillion. We believe such an investment will not only allow

us as a nation to meet many of our pressing infrastructure needs, but will lay the foundation for sustained economic growth in communities large and small. In spurring this growth, a plan of this magnitude should, and I say must, increase the standard of living for Americans across the nation. In order to do so, the immense buying power of the federal government must not be used as leverage to depress wages in local communities – especially construction wages which, adjusted for inflation, have actually been in decline since the late 1970s. Therefore, North America's Building Trades Unions members remain insistent that such a plan include the prevailing wage standards enshrined in the Davis-Bacon and Related Acts that our members have fought for over the course of generations.

For our members, a broad infrastructure plan will encompass not only surface transportation infrastructure, but all modes of infrastructure. While we must use this opportunity to make additional investments in our roads, bridges, and public transit systems, our nation must also invest in schools and other public buildings, municipal water systems, aviation, rail, waterways, broadband, and our energy infrastructure through new, modern power generation facilities, grid upgrades, and investments in energy transportation and distribution.

To address the wide variety of infrastructure needs effectively, we must address them efficiently. In order to do so, we believe it prudent to address our challenges through currently existing programs. Efficiency should not breed duplicative programs designed to achieve the same goal. However, federal programs should be created to meet infrastructure needs that do not have existing public mechanisms to deliver projects.

For our members, a bold infrastructure plan is one that tackles the tough challenges and lays out a vision for a brighter future. I would argue, and I am sure most if not all members of the panel, and the subcommittee would agree, that there is no greater challenge facing surface transportation than the long term solvency of the Highway Trust Fund.

We support a variety of measures to fix the Trust Fund. In our infrastructure policy, which was crafted in collaboration with our 14 affiliated unions, we advocate for increasing the highway user fee and indexing the fee to inflation. We also advocate for the transition to a vehicle miles traveled based system. We also advocate for using repatriated tax dollars from overseas corporate profits to fund infrastructure investment. We are open to a variety of proposals to ensure the solvency of the Trust Fund, and we believe Congress should not squander such an important opportunity to address this issue.

A bold infrastructure plan should also continue to tackle the challenge of major projects that have regional and national economic impacts. One such project that 700 of our members are currently at work on is the roughly \$4 billion Tappan Zee Bridge replacement in New York. With 220 million pounds of U.S. steel and 300 thousand cubic yards of concrete, the sheer size and scope of this construction project is awe inspiring. At its peak, this project employed 1,200 building trades members, and to date, this project is responsible for roughly seven million hours of work.

What those numbers do not tell you is that projects such as these, and in fact all public infrastructure projects, are critical to ensuring a consistent pipeline of skills training that North America's Building Trades Unions, in conjunction with our industry partners, provide through our

privately funded registered apprenticeship programs. Spread out over our 1,600 formal, joint labor-management training centers across the country, as well as over 120 “apprenticeship-readiness” programs, our unions and our contractor partners invest roughly \$1.2 billion of our own capital into training our current and future members, ensuring they have the skills to meet the technological and safety demands of the modern construction industry. Industry and labor, as well as community partners like the National Urban League and YouthBuild, are working in partnership in order to meet the workforce challenges presented by a large investment in infrastructure, and the time to act on such an investment is now.

It is time to start setting goals and solving this problem, because if we do not, American families will ultimately pay the price for inaction. Right now, there are skilled trades men and women – as well as people who are unemployed or underemployed – who need the work, as well as opportunities for career skills training. The pipeline of projects resulting from a massive public infrastructure investment will lead to a multitude of opportunities for skilled career training and education.

Former President Ronald Reagan once said, and I quote: “the bridges and highways we fail to repair today will have to be rebuilt tomorrow at many times the cost.” He went on to say that rebuilding our infrastructure is simple common sense, and that it represents an investment in tomorrow that we must make today.

President Reagan was correct in his assessment over 30 years ago. Unfortunately, his words are just as prominent today, due to continued inaction when it comes to substantive investments in our

infrastructure. Continued inaction will only exacerbate our challenges, and placed unneeded negative pressures on the American economy. It is time once again for the infrastructure of the United States to be the envy of the world, and the men and women of North America's Building Trades Unions are ready, willing, able, and anxious to begin building as soon as possible.