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NATIONAL  
ASSOCIATION  
OF TOWNS  
AND TOWNSHIPS

TESTIMONY OF

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*Director and Past President*

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REGARDING

Rural Highway and Transit Challenges and Programs

BEFORE THE

Subcommittee on Highways and Transit  
of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure  
of the United States House of Representatives

ON

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## **Introduction**

Chairman Crawford, Ranking Member Norton, members of the committee, thank you for the opportunity to speak today about the challenges facing rural roads. I am Mike Koles, the Executive Director of the Wisconsin Towns Association. We represent 1,266 rural municipalities covering the entire rural area of Wisconsin. These municipalities range in geographic size from a few square miles to over 100 square miles. Fifty eight percent (58%) of them are home to less than 1,000 people and 90% have a population less than 2,500.

I am also on the Board of Directors and recently served as President of the National Association of Towns and Townships, which represents over 10,000 of these rural local governments across the country.

In the most the recent Census, 19% of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, but these communities cover 97% of America's land and are home to 68% of the nation's road miles. Most of this country and its lane miles are in what many would erroneously call the middle of nowhere.

The road system in America can be compared to the human circulatory system. Any athlete is going to pay close attention to the health of their circulatory system. They exercise their heart and it pushes the blood to and from capillaries through arteries and veins. The 60,000 miles of capillaries are the last connection that delivers nutrients and oxygen to the 30 trillion cells in the human body and the first connection to transport blood back to the heart and lungs.

While the small eleven ounce heart is important, so are the much larger 60,000 miles of capillaries. Both are critical if the athlete is going to be healthy.

In America, our interstate system forms our heart. State highways function as the transportation system's arteries and veins. And, like the human circulatory system, our local roads form the critical and vast majority of our capillaries that serve as the first and last mile of our economy.

In America's Dairyland, we have a saying, "milk doesn't come from the grocery store." It comes from a farm on one of those rural capillaries. The wood and concrete that build our urban areas comes from a forest or a quarry on one of those rural capillaries. And although you might know Green Bay for the Packers, it is also the toilet paper capital of the world. The pulp that produces the toilet paper comes from the aspen trees that are in a forest on one of those rural capillaries. Simply, without healthy rural roads, our nation's citizens don't have much to eat, don't have much for homes or office buildings, and don't even have toilet paper.

I am here to tell you today that our capillaries have been neglected and are sick, and that sickness hinders our national economy and endangers our safety.

### **Rural Road Composition**

According to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), in 2020 there were over 6 million rural road lane miles. The lane miles were distributed as follows in order of functionality: interstate (2.0%); other freeway (0.4%); principal arterials (3.9%); minor arterials (4.6%); major collectors (13.6%); *minor collectors* (8.6%); and *local* (66.8%).

Due to the nature of functional classification, most entrances to farms, fields, forests, quarries, mines, energy producing lands, and other rural based economic drivers are found in communities with small populations and on roads functionally classified as *minor collectors* and *local*.

### **Rural Roads are Critical to the Economy**

Based on a 2019 UW-Madison analysis of the economic impact of agriculture in Wisconsin using the 2017 USDA Census of Agriculture, the industry is responsible for \$104.8 billion in economic activity and 437,700 jobs. This represents 16.4% of Wisconsin's industrial revenues and 11.8% of employment. Given trends and inflation, economic activity is expected to be even greater following calculations using the 2022 Census of Agriculture.

Wisconsin is the #1 cheese producer (25% of US total). Over 1,200 cheesemakers produce over 600 types of cheese. The state produces more potatoes than all but two and is a top producer of snap beans and peas. The tart cherry crop produced 12.9 million pounds in 2022 and the state is #1 in cranberry production (60% of the country's total). \$3.87 billion in product was exported outside the US (#11 amongst states), bringing in foreign money that recirculates in the domestic economy multiple times.

According to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the forest products industry produces \$24.2 billion in industry output and contributes 130,000 jobs to the state's economy. It is the #1 industry in 10 of Wisconsin's 72 counties; #1 in employment in 8 counties, and the #1 industry for value added in 10 counties. These facts speak to the heavy reliance of certain communities and populations on traditional rural industries and, thus, rural roads.

Nationally the story is no different. According to a TRIP report: "Agriculture, food, and related industries...contributed \$1.2 trillion to the U.S. gross domestic product (GDP) in 2021. This represents 5.3 percent of overall U.S. GDP."

A vast majority of the fields and forests that produce the aforementioned goods, economic impact, and employment are in rural areas and obtain access from roads functionally classified as *minor collector* or *local*. Furthermore, they are certainly in communities well below the 200,000 population threshold to be considered eligible for the U.S. Department of Transportation's Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program.

### **Rural Road and Bridge Condition a Concern**

In 2020, 12% of the nation's rural arterials and collectors were rated in poor condition, 19% percent in mediocre condition, 17% in fair, and only 51% in good. These arterials and collectors represent only 31% of rural roads. Sixty-seven percent (67%) are functionally classified as *local* roads. While a national condition rating for local roads is hard to determine, in Wisconsin 11% of town roads are in poor condition and 76% require significant maintenance and reconstruction.

Of the nation's over 618,000 bridges, 70% (435,189) are rural. In 2022, 8% of the nation's rural bridges were rated as poor or structurally deficient. These are characterized by significant deterioration of the bridge deck and other major components. It is frequently not feasible for modern day agriculture, forestry, mining, or supply chain equipment to use these bridges. Out of all the country's bridges rated poor or structurally deficient, 80% are rural.

Road and bridge conditions often result in weight postings that limit the size and weight of farm machinery, school buses, commercial trucks, and even emergency service vehicles. These weight limits are used as a strategy to preserve public safety and what little road remains. Infrastructure users are forced to haul partial loads or follow longer alternative routes, which can be substantial in rural as compared to urban areas due to the lack of connectivity and a high density road grid system. This results in decreased productivity, greater fuel emissions, increased costs, increased food prices, and reduced fire and ambulance response times. According to a Pacific Economic Cooperation Council study, improving the quality of transportation systems serving the movement of goods from rural to urban areas is a strategy that should be followed to lower food prices and increase economic prosperity.

### **Rural Culverts an Emerging Problem**

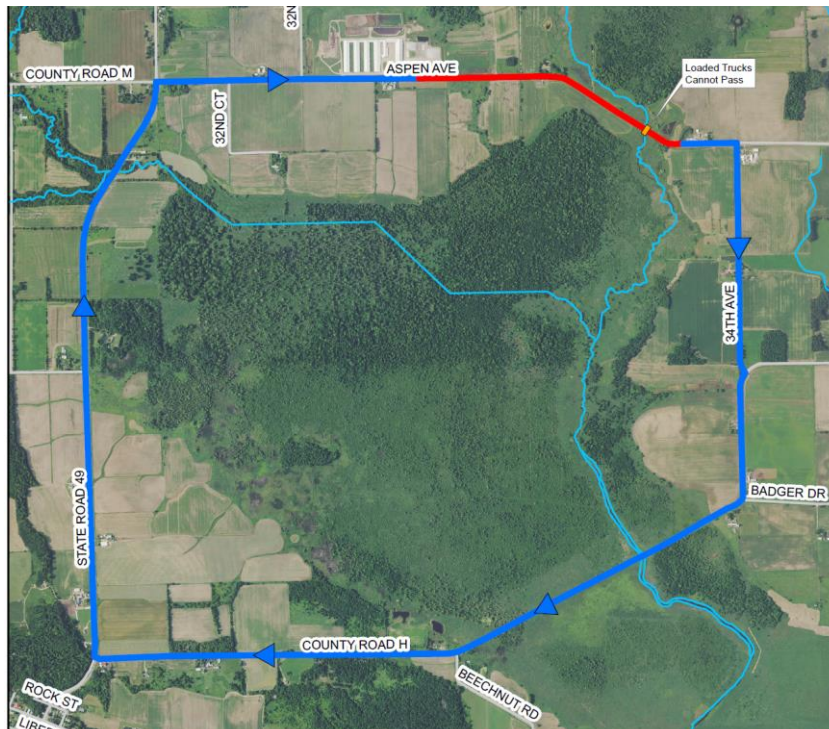
23 CFR 650.305 defines a bridge as "having an opening measured along the center of the roadway of more than 20 feet." The nation's bridges have been located, inventoried, and are regularly inspected for condition. The federal government provides funding for off-system bridges, presumably due to the resulting safety and economic concerns absent the funding.

Any structures under 20 feet are culverts, although colloquially called many things, such as small bridges or bridge-like structures. Unlike bridges, except for several states that have championed efforts to address culverts, we largely don't know where these are, how many there are, or what condition they are in. Furthermore, outside of a small pilot program in IJA (Public Law 117-58) for anadromous fish, federal funding for stand-alone culvert replacement is lacking.

Despite the 20-foot threshold, many culverts look, act, and function like a bridge, thus posing the same safety and economic risks. For example, in the spring of 2023, a 15 foot, 5 inch culvert collapsed under the weight of 20 ton fertilizer tender in the Town of Farmington, Wisconsin, in Representative Van Orden's district (right). Luckily nobody was injured and no fertilizer was spilled in the trout stream. Human and environmental disasters were avoided. Deconstruction of the culvert revealed an estimated age of no later than 1916. The structure was likely built prior to or during WWI.



In the Town of Bloomfield, Wisconsin, a large dairy farm must travel nearly 6 miles to go a few hundred feet to access some of its fields due to a weight limited culvert that spans nearly 20 feet, but doesn't quite make the length necessary for the town to access state or federal (below).



## **Rural Road Safety**

Reports from the Governor's Highway Safety Association (GHSA) and TRIP reveal disturbing rural road safety realities. Fatalities on rural, non-interstate roads occur at a rate double that on all other roads. In 2020, rural roads accounted for 2.17 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled compared to 1.09 deaths on all other roads. Furthermore, despite only being home to 19% of the population, between 2016 and 2020 almost half of all fatalities took place on rural roads. During these same years, the risk of dying in a crash was 62% higher on a rural road than the same trip length on an urban road.

A variety of factors have been found to produce these unfortunate results. For example, rural roads are more likely to be narrow, have limited shoulders, sharp curves, and steep ditch slopes. Interestingly, these are some of the same features that plague efficient agricultural equipment travel. Limited clear zones in the right-of-way increase the number and density of obstacles when a vehicle leaves the road.

Lack of safety mechanisms, like low-cost rumble strips that would help prevent collision with right-of-way obstacles and head-on collisions, are sorely missing on many rural roads. The GHSA report states: "Rural and tribal areas often grapple with limited resources at all levels. Cash-strapped governments must cover broad geographic areas that often have few alternative transportation options. Rural and tribal roads tend to lack safety features...Small communities may not have access to technical expertise – in fact, they may have a single person tasked with all aspects of public safety, from well water to road safety to disaster response."

Lack of resources to employ people to address rural road safety challenges extends to after accident emergency services. Many communities are encountering a fire and EMS crisis as decreased volunteerism and lack of resources to employ full-time emergency responders is producing an increase in already lengthy response times resulting from the extreme distances that must be traveled in rural areas.

## **Solutions**

### **1. Adjust the Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program to target truly rural areas and first mile roads that service the fields, forests, farms, and quarries that feed the nation and provide building materials.**

IJA provided \$2 billion in STP discretionary grants that are available to communities either: a) outside of urban areas; or, b) within urban areas so long as the population is less than 200,000 people. The Wisconsin Towns Association and the National Association of Towns and Townships feel strongly that a population of 200,000 is not rural and highly populated communities outside of urban areas are also not rural.

NATaT supports the Rebuilding Rural Roads Act (H.R. 3002) and the Protecting Infrastructure Investments for Rural America Act (H.R. 5437) that would change the definition of rural in DOT's Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program from 200,000 to 20,000.

- 2. Build upon the paradigm shift included in the FAST Act to the STP block grant that allowed states to allocate 15% of funds dedicated to adjusted census-defined areas that have a population of 50,000 or lower for projects on roadways functionally classified as either rural *minor collector* or *local*. (23 USC Section 133(g) and (k)).**

Roads functionally classified as minor collector and rural are the first and last mile roads in the US supply chain. These comprise 75% of the rural roads in the US and over 99% of Wisconsin's town roads. Previously these roads were not eligible for STP block grant funding.

Wisconsin Department of Transportation Secretary Craig Thompson has actively chosen to use this discretion and has deployed the maximum 15%. This will result in an approximately \$15 million investment over the course of the FAST Act for town roads alone. To date, \$36 million has been awarded to 57 local governments in Wisconsin. The program has proven extremely popular and is significantly overprescribed. A total of 1,057 applications were submitted requesting \$856 million. This is a funding overprescription of 2,378% and speaks to the significant investment need on minor collector and local roads in smaller communities.

- 3. Right size competition for grant funding.**

As was noted by the GHSA, rural communities often have one person that oversees many local government responsibilities. It is not uncommon in a town to have one or two road patrol people that are responsible for 50+ miles of plowing, ditch maintenance, and basic summer road maintenance. They do not have the time or skill set to prepare a competitive grant application. Furthermore, lack of private sector grant writing resources and local government funding even when grant writers are available further plague rural communities. Juxtapose this with a community of 200,000 that likely has a public works director and possibly even a grant writer on staff. The much larger community certainly has an advantage in obtaining both formula and discretionary funding.

Again, WisDOT has been a leader in addressing this challenge. The 15% in formula funding noted in recommendation #2 was suballocated to different municipal types, thus, for example, preventing a city of 50,000 people from competing with a town of 250.

- 4. Consider targeted changes to the quality based selection process.**

When rural communities do muster the resources to hire out project scoping and grant writing, the current quality based selection process requirement significantly diminishes the

supply of engineering firms willing to do such work. Firms that assist in project scoping and grant writing are typically prohibited from providing the much higher profit margin engineering services to the community. This exacerbates the already existing shortage of engineering firms to assist small communities in an attempt to compete with larger communities.

**5. Continue the FAST Act and IIJA investment in bridge funding.**

In addition to the increased funding in the FAST Act, the required off-system set aside was increased from 15% to 20%. Both are a welcome increase and should be continued in a future authorization. The IIJA created a new Bridge Formula Program (BFP) that, in Wisconsin's case, awarded \$45 million annually (\$225 million total). Under BFP, a minimum of 15% must be spent on off-system bridges and projects must be funded at 100% federal participation. WisDOT chose to exceed the 15% minimum and allocate \$180 million to date to local off-system bridges resulting in 330 bridge projects that are 100% federally funded. Based on conversations with my colleagues on the NATaT Board, WisDOT's actions are an anomaly.

**6. Increase funds for the federal bridge program and create a carve-out to include off-system non-state structures less than 20 feet, which states must distribute through a competitive process.**

**7. Create a program modeled after Wisconsin's Agricultural Road Improvement Program.**

Wisconsin recently created a \$150 million pilot program to increase agricultural supply chain efficiencies through reconstruction of roads functionally classified as *minor collector* and *local* that are subject to weight limits. Reconstructed roads can no longer be subject to a weight limit. This program will prove the first step in creating priority agricultural routes on which farmers, loggers, and processors will be able to carry full weights throughout the year.

**8. Achieve a stable, consistent, and enhanced funding stream.**

In 2021, FHWA estimated the US faces a \$180 billion backlog in rural road and bridge maintenance and construction. Investments in the FAST Act and IIJA are a welcome and necessary injection that must continue. The enhanced funding is necessary; however, achieving greater consistency and stability is needed to empower local governments to engage in more effective planning and move toward an asset management approach to managing their infrastructure. Furthermore, this would allow materials suppliers, engineers, and contractors to more efficiently prepare, which would avoid infrastructure construction and maintenance pricing bubbles.



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