

CONGRESSWOMAN PRAMILA JAYAPAL
Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Members' Day Hearing Statement – 5 minutes/910 words
Wednesday, May 1, 2019 ~12:25 PM

Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to share how an investment in infrastructure will benefit the people and economy of the country in the context of my district.

Washington's 7th district is growing rapidly, booming with innovation, people and industry. The downside of this success is that our region must address increasing traffic, the decreasing affordability of housing, and the growing effects of climate change.

In my district, residents have several times voted to tax themselves to create a regional transit system that is helping to ameliorate traffic and allowing working people to live farther afield where housing is more affordable. The federal government should match that commitment. For that reason, I come to you with three elements that I strongly urge the committee to include in its infrastructure bill.

First, it is time to reform the Harbor Maintenance Tax, or HMT.

The HMT is the single largest source of federal funding for coastal ports and waterways. Unfortunately, it is not working as it should. By fixing the HMT we can drive additional investment to our coastal ports without any new taxes. I applaud the Committee's focus on making sure annual HMT revenues are fully spent, putting the trust back in the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund.

Shippers pay the Harbor Maintenance Tax when they use ports; the tax is intended to support infrastructure at ports, and this investment is critically needed. Fully using the tax is a no brainer. However, if we only address full use without solving other ports' concerns, we would be leaving some behind.

There is broad agreement among policymakers and the ports they represent that a change in the distribution of HMT funds will drive additional investment to our coastal ports without any new taxes. As an example of the current inequity, the six donor ports identified in the 2014 WRRDA bill generated 53% of HMT collections in 2017 but received only 3% in return. That means that the ports of Seattle and Tacoma receive only pennies for every HMT dollar generated; some years even less than a penny. Not only is this distribution unfair, but the added cost of the HMT also contributes to the loss of cargo from Puget

Sound ports to nearby ports in Canada, a phenomenon that the Federal Maritime Commission has validated.

Congress should pass comprehensive HMT reform legislation that resolves the wide range of concerns the nation's ports have about the HMT.

Second, we must direct more federal funding to the needs of our smaller communities. In my district, Seattle is booming, but so are the cities that surround Seattle. While the USDOT is now setting aside 50 percent of BUILD grants for rural areas, this leaves small cities like Burien, Normandy Park, and Edmonds, Washington behind.

For instance, the cities of Shoreline and Lake Forest Park are currently working on the redevelopment of 145th Street, a thoroughfare that will be a major conveyor of bus, bike and pedestrian traffic to and from Interstate-5 and Sound Transit's Light Rail system. But making this road accessible to heavier and multi-modal traffic requires investment. The tax base in these communities – communities that have already voted to tax themselves to support regional light rail – is not large enough for investments of this size. The federal government's dollars would be well repaid as these thriving communities contribute to the economy.

Third, it is time for the federal government to invest in green infrastructure. Green infrastructure not only addresses the impacts of climate change, but it works with nature and reduces the use of fuels and resources that contribute to climate change. Research suggests that Washington's 7th District, and indeed, the entire Pacific Northwest will see more intense rain events in the coming years. At the same time, Washington state is rife with outdated culverts that neither adequately move stormwater nor allow the passage of fish.

A successful infrastructure bill will make needed improvements to roads, bridges, our energy grid, and water systems, and will take into account what we know about climate and nature. This means that we use estuaries and wetlands to filter pollutants, clean water and provide habitat for salmon and forage fish. It means that we increase permeable surfaces, replace lead pipes, use wind and solar power, and expand bus and rail systems to get people out of their cars. And if we make these investments at the right levels, we will also create jobs.

In closing, I commend the chairman and this committee for taking up the cause of infrastructure, something that has been chronically and tragically underfunded, and I offer these parting thoughts especially in the context of the upcoming reauthorization of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation, or FAST Act.

Our highway system alone has suffered greatly since we stopped raising the gas tax, which is extremely efficient and cost-effective to collect. While, thankfully for our environment, the energy efficiency of vehicles is improving and more people are turning to vehicles fueled by alternative sources, this means that the gas tax will decline in value over time. We need an alternative.

To that end, the Washington State Transportation Commission has been researching and assessing a Road Usage Charge, or RUC system since 2011. The RUC creates equity as it is assessed on miles driven regardless of fuel source or efficiency. So, like my other recommendations, the RUC is an idea that better fits the realities of the world we live in and the needs of our people. Thank you.