

Secretary Buttigieg Testimony

House T&I Committee

September 20, 2023

Chairman Graves, Ranking Member Larsen, congratulations on taking up these well-deserved leadership roles since I last was before this committee.

And before I start, I want to take a moment to send our most heartfelt condolences to a beloved member of this Committee, Representative Peltola, who lost her husband after a plane crash in Alaska last week. Our prayers are with Mary and their family and friends.

To all committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today and for your ongoing partnership.

The first time I came before this committee, we were making the case for an infrastructure package to address decades of underinvestment, deal with clear risks on our roads, rails, and skies, and confront a pandemic that upended transportation in every way.

The second year I testified here, the historic Bipartisan Infrastructure Law was a reality, and we were fast at work standing up new programs and preparing to get much-needed funding out the door.

Today, I'm proud to report that the Biden administration has over 37,000 infrastructure projects moving forward in every state and territory. Through these projects: we're making people safer; we're creating jobs and addressing transportation inequities in big cities and on rural main streets; we're making our infrastructure more resilient against extreme weather while reducing the transportation emissions that are contributing to those issues; and we're strengthening supply chains to keep goods moving and reduce prices.

I'd like to highlight just a few examples I've seen recently.

Last week, I was outside of Salem, South Dakota, where we're helping repair 28 miles of I-90—a major freight corridor-- and adding new truck parking, which we consistently hear from truckers is their top priority to increase the safety and dignity of the job.

In July, I was at the Lehigh Valley Airport in Pennsylvania, where we celebrated an expansion and new security checkpoint to provide a faster, easier experience for travelers – my first chance to be at a ribbon cutting on a project with funds from the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law.

And last month, I was in Northern Indiana where we're helping relocate a freight rail interchange, which will improve a rail crossing that is a problem for hundreds of kids trying

to get to high school, while supporting goods movement for the many manufacturers in the area, and helping improve the safe transport of hazardous material that sometimes moves through the community of Elkhart.

Individually, each of these projects is a big deal for the community. Collectively, they add up to a national undertaking that is giving American families, workers, and businesses, the foundation to succeed well into this century.

But I do want to be clear-eyed about how much work remains – on reducing roadway deaths, on making our rails and skies safer, on strengthening public transit and helping it adapt to post-pandemic changes, and more.

That's why even as we keep full speed ahead to deliver good infrastructure projects, we also seek your further partnership in two critical areas: one, ensuring our transportation safety work can continue by preventing a government shutdown; and two, delivering further improvements that are achievable only through new legislation.

To that end, I want to praise this committee for your leadership in advancing a FAA Reauthorization bill that keeps up the momentum for this important legislation.

We are making good progress with the authorities we currently have; for example, we hit our goal for air traffic controller hiring this year, with a total of 2,600 ATCs now in training. We helped airlines lower cancellation rates from their pandemic spikes down to 1.6% this year, which is also below 2019 rates. And we have a wave of new rules underway to protect passengers when their flights are delayed or cancelled, and to get rid of junk fees for things like being seated next to your kid.

But we are counting on FAA reauthorization legislation that ultimately passes to provide additional, critical authorities and resources needed to keep our airports and communities safe, and we ask Congress to get it to the President's desk.

Meanwhile, America needs the same bipartisan leadership you've shown on aviation when it comes to rail safety.

Freight rail safety legislation, proposed by Democrats and Republicans together after the Norfolk Southern derailment in East Palestine, has yet to advance. For the safety of thousands of communities that are host to rail lines, we need your help getting that legislation over the finish line.

Again, the Department of Transportation is doing what we can. We've proposed requiring at least two crewmembers on certain trains and are right now working to finalize the rule establishing minimum crewmember requirements. We're conducting more than 6,000 focused inspections on routes over which high-hazard flammable trains travel; we're making the biggest investment in rail infrastructure in modern memory; and more.

But if America is going to reach a place where 1,000 derailments per year is no longer accepted as the cost of doing business, we need new authorities to hold railroads accountable – which this legislation would provide.

I believe that the 2020s will be known not just for those early years when the pandemic upended transportation, but for the years we're entering now, when transportation gets safer, more affordable, and more efficient. With tens of thousands of projects underway, President Biden has begun laying the literal foundation for that – and with further partnership with Congress we can maintain this new momentum, and ensure that the transportation laws protecting Americans are modernized alongside physical transportation infrastructure.

Thank you again, and I look forward to your questions.