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Senator Murray Pushes for Transportation & Safety Progress at First Hearing with Transportation Secretary Mary Peters

At hearing on the President's FY 2008 Budget Request, Murray Outlines Need to Pass Joint Funding Resolution and Address Rising Highway Fatalities

Washington, D.C... Today, U.S. Senator Patty Murray (D-Wash) chaired the session's first hearing of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies. The witness was U.S. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, who testified on the President's FY 2008 budget proposal for the Department of Transportation.

Senator Murray's opening statement follows.

Today, the Subcommittee on Transportation and Housing and Urban Development and Related Agencies holds its first hearing of the year. Before we begin, I want to welcome four new members to the Subcommittee: Senators Alexander, Feinstein, Johnson and Lautenberg. I also want to give a warm welcome to our principal witness today, Transportation Secretary Mary Peters.

The Joint Funding Resolution

Today's hearing comes at a very important time. While the official purpose of this hearing is to review the President's Transportation budget for 2008, the reality is that the Congress has not yet enacted a transportation budget for 2007.

Currently pending in the Senate is H.J. Res. 20, the Joint Funding Resolution. That bill was developed by the both the House and the Senate Appropriations Committees on a bipartisan basis. Its goal is to finalize the funding levels for the Department of Transportation and most other departments for the remainder of this year. It was made necessary by the fact that the last Congress never completed the appropriations process before adjourning.

The Joint Funding Resolution, for the most part, freezes programs across the government at their 2006 funding level. Importantly, however, the bill also makes necessary funding adjustments to deal with critical programs that cannot and should not

endure a funding freeze.

In the case of the Transportation Department, we were not prepared to ignore our responsibility to ensure safety in our skies, on our highways and on our railways. The bill provides funding increases totaling more than a quarter billion dollars to ensure that there are adequate numbers of personnel to control air traffic, as well as inspect and enforce safety rules governing commercial airliners, trucks, railroads and pipelines.

Without this additional funding, the FAA Administrator told us that she would be required to put every air traffic controller and every aviation inspector on the street for two weeks without pay between now and the end of September.

The Joint Funding Resolution currently before the Senate also boosts funding for AMTRAK to \$1.3 billion. Under the current Continuing Resolution, AMTRAK's funding would remain \$200 million lower than it was last year. That would endanger passenger rail service across the country as well as the annual maintenance expenses that must be made to ensure safe operations in the Northeast Corridor.

Finally the bill pending before the Senate provides an additional \$3.75 billion in additional formula funding for our nation's highway and transit systems. That funding will serve to create almost 160,000 new jobs, while alleviating congestion. It will be an important infusion of cash to the States to help them address their most pressing bridge replacements, highway widenings, and safety enhancements. When you look at all the highway needs across my State of Washington, the additional \$71 million the State will receive is urgently needed and can be put to work right away.

The Department of Transportation, like most of the rest of the government, is operating under the terms of Continuing Resolution that makes none of the funding adjustments I just discussed. It simply freezes all programs or cuts them to reflect the cuts that were passed in the House of Representatives during the last Congress. That CR will expire a week from today . February 15th.

Now, some of our Senate colleagues have suggested that we should not adopt the new Joint Funding Resolution. Instead, they have advocated that we extend the existing CR through the remainder of the year. They are saying that we should forgo these desperately needed funds for highways and transit. That we should allow the FAA to furlough all its safety personnel for two weeks. That we should allow our aviation, truck, railroad and pipeline inspection workforce to dwindle.

As part of this hearing, we will learn Secretary Peters' views on this question. And tomorrow, Senators will have their first opportunity to vote on this question, one way or another. Are we going to debate and pass the new Joint Funding Resolution? Or are we going to ignore our responsibility to transportation safety and investment for an entire fiscal year?

The President's FY 2008 Budget

For 2008, the President has sent us a transportation budget totaling just under \$67 billion. That represents an increase of \$4.6 billion above the FY 2007 level that we hope to achieve by enacting the Joint Funding Resolution. This 7.3 percent increase is a substantial boost given the tight funding we find across the rest of the President's budget. My biggest concern with this budget proposal is not what it does do, but what it doesn't do. It seeks substantial new resources for one critical need . alleviating highway congestion, while providing little growth and even less emphasis on an equally critical need . reducing highway fatalities.

Reducing Traffic Congestion

As a resident of the Puget Sound region, I can attest to the critical national need to address congestion. Congestion is keeping parents from their children and workers from their jobs. My state serves as a critical cargo gateway from Asia. Our future prosperity requires that we can get cargo out of our ports and onto highways and railways that are moving . not clogged with congestion.

The Administration's budget proposes \$175 million for a series of new programs designed to relieve congestion. We are told that this investment is part of a new "comprehensive, department-wide National Strategy to Reduce Congestion." The Secretary is serious about this initiative, and I am willing to give it a careful look.

A Retreat on Safety as Highway Deaths Increase

But I also have to ask, where is the new, comprehensive, department-wide "National Strategy to Reduce Highway Deaths"? Back in early 2003 when she was serving as our Federal Highway Administrator, Mary Peters noted that there were 41,000 highway related fatalities annually and said that we were facing "a national safety crisis." She was right. Tragically, however, the only thing that has happened since then is that the number of highway fatalities has increased. And it's not just the number of deaths that have increased. The fatality rate has increased as well. The numbers are all going in the wrong direction. The 41,000 fatalities that alarmed the Secretary back in 2003 have now grown to more than 43,400. That is the highest number recorded in 15 years. The Bush Administration established a performance goal for the Department of Transportation to reduce highway fatalities to 1 fatality per 100 million vehicle miles traveled by 2008. Unfortunately, for 2005 the most recent year for which we have data, the rate was 45 percent higher than that . 1.45 fatalities.

The Administration's budget documents indicate that the Department, instead of redoubling itself to achieving its goal, is now pushing off this goal until 2011. The Bush Administration is lowering the bar when it comes to saving lives, and I find it deeply disappointing. The growing carnage on our highways cries out for national attention and national leadership. Instead, the President's budget offers resignation and retreat.

The Department of Transportation has many different responsibilities. One of the jobs of this subcommittee is to make sure that the policy direction and funding we provide is

balanced between all the transportation modes and all the challenges that the Department faces. I commend the Department for trying to seriously address congestion on a department-wide basis and asking for some innovative funding to back it up. But the Department needs to bring an equally serious focus to reducing highway deaths. With the statistics moving in the wrong direction, one thing that is clear is that the current strategies aren't working.

In the next few weeks, our subcommittee will have a special hearing on just this topic with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the NTSB and other officials to address this problem. I encourage all subcommittee members to attend.

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