

Senate Committee on Appropriations
Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies
Subcommittee Hearing

“Transportation Infrastructure Resilience: Investing in the Future”

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Testimony of U.S. Department of Transportation Deputy Secretary Polly Trottenberg

Chairman Schatz, Ranking Member Collins, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today. I am eager to speak with you about how the Department of Transportation’s policies and approaches enhance infrastructure resilience and how the President’s American Jobs Plan will help us create stronger, more resilient transportation infrastructure.

The Biden-Harris Administration recognizes that climate change is here and demands a national response. Wildfires, droughts, floods, and other high-impact weather events have become more and more common. They have destroyed communities, damaged infrastructure, and claimed lives. And the cost has been staggering. In 2020 alone, the U.S. suffered 22 high-impact weather disasters that each cost at least \$1 billion in damages.

Meanwhile, rising sea levels are dramatically eroding our coastlines in many places, putting communities and vital infrastructure at risk. Our seaports and coastal airports face storm surges, chronic flooding, and the risk of permanent inundation. Crucial transportation hubs in states like Hawaii and Louisiana are at severe risk.

When Superstorm Sandy charged up the Atlantic Coast in the fall of 2012, it brought a record-setting storm surge that pummeled coastal communities large and small. Sandy destroyed homes and businesses, left millions without power, and cost our nation tens of billions.

When I became the Commissioner of the New York City Department of Transportation in 2014, I inherited a recovery still very much in process and witnessed the devastation wrought by a storm of that size and power, and the enormous challenges of building back critical infrastructure in a dense urban environment that can withstand future weather and climate disasters.

We have seen similar destruction caused by Hurricane Harvey in 2017, the California wildfires in 2020, the winter ice storm in Texas just a few months ago, and the January collapse of Highway 1 in Big Sur, California, caused by heavy rain and storm debris, along with many, many more events. We are still rebuilding and learning from those

disasters. They have taught us that if we want to protect the public, prevent damage and disruption, and save taxpayer dollars, we must proactively incorporate resilience into our transportation infrastructure, rather than turn to federal emergency relief funds for repairs after the damage has already been done.

Today, I would like to talk to you about the actions we are taking at DOT on climate change and resilience to protect our nation's infrastructure, and how the American Jobs Plan can help us do even more.

At DOT, we are supporting the President's aggressive goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 by investing in and accelerating a shift to clean transportation, including clean transit, trains, airplanes, ships, and vehicles, as well as making walking and biking safer and easier. Furthermore, we have developed four key strategies to make our infrastructure more resilient.

- 1) We can build stronger or better, or retrofit existing infrastructure to prepare for and adapt to changes in the climate, incorporating nature-based strategies that can help protect transportation infrastructure – such as constructed marshes to protect coastal highways –wherever possible.

- 2) We can add redundancy and efficiency to the transportation network by building new links, multimodal hubs, or routes.
- 3) We can relocate transportation assets to less vulnerable, but still well-connected, locations.
- 4) And, lastly, we can use more intensive maintenance or operational strategies to help address disruptions.

In addition, the Federal Highway Administration and Federal Transit Administration both offer emergency relief programs that are a valuable tool for communities. These programs have provided over \$15 billion for highways since 2005 and \$11 billion for transit since 2013 to rebuild transportation assets following a declared disaster. The Department has worked closely with your states and transit agencies to get resources and aid on the ground quickly. We encourage agencies to take advantage of every opportunity to use these funds to build back better and stronger infrastructure. We recognize how important these programs are for many of you here, and we want to make sure that we are effectively collaborating with you.

But we also want to proactively avoid damage by building resilient infrastructure. We are partnering with State, local, and Tribal agencies to evaluate the climate vulnerabilities of their transportation assets. We are piloting tools and metrics for resilience, like DOT's "Resilience and

Disaster Recovery Tool Suite,” which will help state and local agencies incorporate resilience into their planning. And we are working with our partners to tailor resilience options to each transportation facility.

However, disaster recovery and resilience efforts will require more resources as weather and climate disasters become ever more frequent. The President’s American Jobs Plan is a chance to jump-start our efforts to make transformational investments in projects and approaches that build resilience. One highlight of the plan is a \$50 billion investment in infrastructure resilience across a range of sectors, including transportation. We look forward to working with you to make sure that these investments meet community needs.

The Plan also allocates \$115 billion for a “fix it right” approach to repairing our highways, bridges, and main streets. The Plan will decrease vehicle-produced greenhouse gas emissions by investing \$85 billion in transit and \$80 billion in rail, as well as \$174 billion to support the nationwide adoption of electric vehicles. It calls for \$25 billion for our airports, including funding for the Airport Improvement Program and upgrades to FAA assets, and \$17 billion for inland waterways and ports. Additionally, the plan provides \$20 billion to improve road safety for all users, including increases to existing safety programs and a new Safe Streets for All program to fund state and local “vision zero” plans

and other improvements to reduce crashes and fatalities, especially for cyclists and pedestrians.

Furthermore, the Plan will improve equity by ensuring that at least 40% of the benefits of climate investments flow to underserved communities, who bear disproportionate impacts of transportation pollution and are more vulnerable to negative effects of climate change.

In totality, we believe the American Jobs Plan could be a transformational investment in making the U.S. transportation system more resilient and environmentally sustainable.

The AJP also makes financial sense. Investing in infrastructure that can't withstand climate change is just throwing good money after bad. And research indicates that the financial benefits of resilience far outweigh the costs. The National Institute of Building Sciences found that for every dollar of federal mitigation grants we spend to avoid disasters before they happen, we save *six* dollars.

Investing in a more sustainable, equitable transportation system will create jobs and new American industries and will help us tackle climate change, improve safety, and increase quality of life, especially for those most negatively impacted over the past decades. But addressing resilience requires more than money. It requires an

interdisciplinary effort to address challenges in science, politics, and financing. To succeed, we need to partner with you in Congress; with state, local, and tribal transportation leaders; with industry; with scientists and researchers; and with local communities.

I look forward to working with members of the Committee to make that possible. Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today. I am happy to answer your questions.