Transportation Challenges of Metropolitan Areas in Ohio

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Testimony of
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***Assistant Director,* Ohio Department of Transportation**
to the U.S. House of Representatives
Subcommittee on Highways and Transit

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Good morning Chairman DeFazio and members of the Committee. On behalf of Ohio Governor Ted Strickland and Director James Beasley of the Ohio Department of Transportation, I thank you for asking me to share Ohio's transportation story. I am Jolene Molitoris, Assistant Director for Ohio's Department of Transportation.

Few people realize that Ohio - only 35th in the nation in terms of land size - has the 2nd largest inventory of bridges, the 4th most operating rail routes, the 4th largest interstate system, the 7th largest state highway network and the 12th most transit ridership. Ohio has seven major metropolitan areas: Cleveland, Columbus, Cincinnati, Dayton, Akron, Youngstown and Toledo, as well as ten smaller metropolitan centers. All these cities have transportation challenges that can be improved by changes at home and in Washington.

Ohio's most pressing federal financial challenge is the immediate need to ensure the solvency of the nation's Highway Trust Fund. The latest figures from the Congressional Budget Office forecast a potential loss of between $140 million to $400 million for Ohio alone, representing a major blow to projects planned for as early as 2009 and 2010.

The country's underinvestment in transportation for many decades has resulted in an aging infrastructure with dramatically increasing demands and many needs. Ohio is no exception. A significant increase in federal transportation dollars and fair distribution of those dollars is critical. Ohio's donor status did improve to 92% for highway dollars under SAFETEA-LU, but most undesirable is the fact that Ohio receives a mere 51% return on each dollar contributed to the Mass Transit Account.

Under Governor Strickland, a strong and efficient multi-modal transportation system in Ohio is a priority to retaining and attracting the jobs and businesses we need. Just last week, Governor Strickland and the State legislature announced a $1.57 billion bipartisan economic stimulus package which includes major investments in logistics, infrastructure, bridges and other transportation projects. 57,000 new jobs are anticipated. We are acting at home to create transportation solutions, but the state and the private sector alone cannot resolve our transportation challenges. We need an effective federal partner.

Let me touch on a few challenges standing in the way of that partnership.

(1) The first is a better recognition that urban projects, by their very nature, cost significantly more. Like threading a needle with an eight-lane highway, we are trying to modernize roadways tightly woven in a built environment. Modernizing off-ramps and on-ramps - once acceptable but now deemed dangerous by today’s standards - is not only complicated, but in some cases, the fix can have unseen economic consequences on downtown livelihood. In an urban setting, right of way costs soar. And some projects come to a grinding halt when historic properties stand in the way. Even just the maintenance of traffic during construction adds significant cost, as work must be pieced together in small sections over long periods of time.

(2) While the government has little power over basic construction costs, our partnership could see a more effective use of its dollars with less federal micro-management. Oversight of project development continues to be lengthy and bureaucratic. Amendments in SAFETEA-LU were intended

to improve efficiency in project delivery, but actual change has been modest. Ohio is a leader in environmental compliance and construction mitigation. But this higher review forces all state DOTs to produce more detail and paper than needed, often times simply to address a federal reviewer's comments instead of project needs.

A prime example of both these issues is the reconstruction of Cleveland's I-90 Innerbelt. What started as a $500 million replacement of an aging bridge was stretched by federal expansion of the project's scope and by this process-oriented delay. Fixing the Innerbelt stands now, at least, at $1.4 billion, and growing each month. For our metropolitan projects, we should explore putting federal approvals and state accountability at the program level - not at a time consuming project by project detailed analysis.

Somewhat connected is a second challenge: the use of one-size-fits-all programmatic approaches to address project level mitigation needs. Rather than the current prescriptive remedies, a menu of green options could give states flexibility while still protecting the environment. Imagine, instead of following today's impact-for-impact mitigation logic, that preservation opportunities can be explored that would allow States to focus on the most important needs of that region, such as farmland preservation. In some urban settings, wetland mitigation simply brings flocks of geese to downtown streets, instead of addressing the larger issues of climate change.

(3) On the topic of "greener" alternatives, a third challenge continues to be a lack of federal incentive to help cities pursue alternatives to the automobile. Simply put, federal transportation funding favors highways over other transportation modes. The Federal Highway Administration will contribute up to 80 or 90 percent for highway improvements but only 50 percent for transit projects under the Federal Transit Administration's New Start Program.

(4) Another point on the transit disincentive is FTA's ever-changing criteria. In Columbus, a passenger light rail project did not meet FTA's New Start criteria, even though Columbus is now the state's most populous city and one of the few growing regions in the Midwest. It has become almost impossible for most cities to introduce passenger rail projects - commuter rail, light rail, or streetcar – with federal help. One could interpret the constantly moving target as a technique to reduce FTA's investments in these alternative transportation options.

Finally, a story underscoring the need for transit: In Ohio, our 59 public transit systems serve half-a-million customers every weekday. More than 60% of all those trips are work related. For many Ohioans, it's public transportation or public assistance. In Cleveland, ranked last year as the nation's poorest city, one in four citizens do not have access to a car. Last year, a new shopping center was set to open on the site of an abandoned steel mill. The redevelopment in a core urban area meant jobs for many who had none. At the new Target store, to get to those new jobs, more than half of the applicants needed bus service that wasn't currently available. By investing just $200,000 more annually, the regional transit authority expanded its service to run a half-hour after the store closes, but at the cost of cutting service to other parts of town. The story is repeated time and again in several of Ohio's major cities.

The bottom line for Ohio and its transportation system: the proper level of investment, wisely and fairly made, with the leveraging of private dollars, our own state commitment and an effective federal partner who helps us solve rather than exacerbate our challenges, will give us the transportation system we so urgently need. A first rate multi-modal transportation system is key to the success of Ohio and the nation.