

Written Statement for the Record

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And

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Thank you, Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Duncan and members of the subcommittee, for the opportunity to comment on the state of transportation planning, our challenges and successes, as we continue to implement the requirements set forth in SAFETEA-LU. The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) and the San Joaquin Council of Governments (SJCOG) stand ready to assist in the formation of the next surface transportation authorization and build on the lessons learned through these and upcoming hearings.

My name is Andrew Chesley, and I am the Executive Director of the San Joaquin Council of Governments, located in Stockton, California. I also serve on NARC's Executive Director's Council as a Regional Representative for the California region, and provide both policy and practitioner level information and guidance to the association.

The National Association of Regional Councils is a national, non-profit trade organization that serves as a national voice for regionalism, advocating for multi-regional cooperation as the most effective way to address community planning and development opportunities and issues. NARC is governed by local elected officials and represents member organizations composed of multiple local governments that work together to improve America's communities - large and small, urban and rural. Through advocacy and assistance, NARC's mission is to increase funding and authority for regional councils, regardless of their size, and to strengthen American regions and communities in transportation, economic and community development, homeland security, and the environment.

Regional councils deliver an array of federal, state and local programs that provide planning support and technical assistance to local governments in the areas of transportation, economic and community development, homeland security, and the environment. The network of nationwide regional councils includes organizations such as Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPO), Councils of Government (COG), Rural Planning Organizations (RPO), Economic Development Districts (EDD) and Local Development Districts (LDD). Regional councils are created by compact and enabling legislation as consortia of local governments. Their mission is the delivery of services and programs for economic development, first responder and 9-1-1, health care, infrastructure development, aging services, air and water quality, land-use planning, work force development, and transportation planning at a regional level. MPOs are mandated under federal law and as such have important responsibilities in planning and programming federal transportation dollars at the local and regional level. As such, regional councils and MPOs represent local elected officials from cities, counties, townships, and villages.

The San Joaquin Council of Governments is a Joint Powers Authority comprised of the County of San Joaquin and the Cities of Stockton, Lodi, Manteca, Tracy, Ripon, Escalon and Lathrop. SJCOG serves as the regional transportation planning agency and a technical and informational resource for these jurisdictions. While regional transportation planning is its primary role, SJCOG examines population statistics, airport land use, habitat and open space planning, and other regional issues. SJCOG also fosters intergovernmental coordination, within San Joaquin County, neighboring jurisdictions, the state, and various federal agencies.

The members of NARC support this Committee's efforts toward creating a full and robust surface transportation system, and as we work toward the authorization of the next surface transportation program, NARC and its members welcome the committee's questions in addressing the needs,

opportunities, and obstacles facing our nation's regional organizations and constituent local governments.

Mr. Chairman, the people of this nation are acutely aware of the transportation and infrastructure challenges we face in the coming years. Whether it is the dramatic increase in fuel prices that leads our citizens to demand greater transit options; the tragic Southern California Metrolink crash that leads our citizens to inquire about the safety of their daily commute; or the increasing attention that congestion is paid; the American people are ready to change the way they think about their transportation options.

The pending expiration of the nation's current transportation authorization, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA-LU), provides us with the opportunity to create a truly integrated transportation system. One in which simplicity, consistency, authority, and flexibility take precedence. We can harness the will of the nation to change our decision making process and continue to create strong and safe linkages. We can achieve a system that seamlessly moves people and goods.

Mr. Chairman, we need a new national vision with a strong federal partner that plays an active role in planning our transportation system, especially as related to commerce and projects that effect the nation as a whole.

Our nation's regional transportation planners play a critical role in ensuring this integrated transportation system comes to fruition. Federally authorized MPOs follow a process that is the voice of the community, leverage their transportation planning requirements with other responsibilities, and integrate factors that contribute to a comprehensive system which best addresses the needs of their diverse communities.

There are several distinct ways that, when next authorized, regional planning organizations will be able to assist the federal government in creating a robust, comprehensive surface transportation system.

The success of regional planning is contingent upon proper legal and financial authority for local elected officials and adequate resources to build capacity for greater regional cooperation in addressing the key transportation issues such as the integration of urban, suburban and rural interests; efficient goods movement; transportation safety planning; environmental mitigation; good decision-making; and the future financing of our transportation system.

Working with regions of all sizes to garner adequate resources is crucial to the success of the surface transportation system. It is critical that regional organizations of all sizes continue to play a vital role in transportation development. The performance of our nation's regions is directly related to authority and funding. By way of example, California has many mid-size and smaller regions – like my organization and smaller – who manage very complex issues, very successfully usually with few staff and limited resources. Therefore, one of our top priorities at the local and regional level is authority. If we structure the transportation program to guide more resources to all regions, large and small, urban and rural, and allow local elected officials and their community partners to make the decisions they need to ensure the

growth and safety of their communities, we will experience even more successful transportation planning and programming.

The current federal program clearly needs to be simplified and streamlined. The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Commission rightfully called for a collapsing of over 100 federal surface transportation programs into a few. Regional planning organizations would welcome the collapse of the myriad pots of money into one surface transportation account, from which we are able to prioritize the needs of our regions. This simplicity becomes even more important to MPOs as state level law moves to quickly outpace federal level requirements with respect to integrating land use considerations into transportation planning. In California, we have landmark legislation in front of Governor Schwarzenegger that dramatically raises the stakes in comprehensive planning, which seeks to reduce our carbon footprint to 1990 levels. Almost 40% of greenhouse gas emissions are traced to transportation as a source; this legislation puts the regional transportation planners on the front line in this effort, and will require all of the financial tools possible at our disposal. California is only among the first to tackle this issue head on. Across the country there are efforts underway to reduce the impact of transportation on climate conditions.

There are several ways in which an integrated federal surface transportation system could be facilitated by regional planning organizations if the requirements and opportunities were more consistent. For example, transportation planning requires some of the most sophisticated tools for modeling potential and alternative transportation options. If regional planning organizations had readily available data in standardized formats, the challenge posed to MPOs, particularly small and medium-sized agencies, would be significantly lessened. The level of money and sophistication necessary to meet the changing expectations about what these tools are able to do is beyond the technical capability of most agencies. For many agencies like my own, transportation planning becomes secondary to the operation of our transportation model. Demonstrating air quality conformity is the number one priority for our modeling activities.

In order for regional transportation to answer some of the large questions of the day, the list of “needs” is long and includes:

1. the ability to model complex transportation (and train personnel), air quality and land use interactions;
2. data resources to build the models, and test capabilities;
3. regular data maintenance capabilities to keep the models fresh and responsive;
4. the ability to measure and model greenhouse gas emissions;
5. expand our technical understanding of greenhouse gas emissions and transportation.

Our regions would also be more successful if funding were consistent. The vagaries of a fee based user system tied to gas purchases are impacting us severely. As you can appreciate from your own regional needs, we need a more consistent and long-term funding source.

Regional planning organizations need to be given the flexibility to explore answers to federal planning requirements that take into account our unique regional characteristics. For example, we would certainly

seek some flexibility in the air quality conformity deadlines and transportation planning document deadlines in order to promote mobility. The San Joaquin Valley often finds itself in non-attainment for most air quality pollutants which are federally-monitored, and this November, the entire San Joaquin Valley will go into a “conformity lockdown” which will likely last until March, 2009. This is the result of a complex set of interactions between EPA, FHWA, Caltrans, the California Air Resources Board, the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and the eight regional transportation planning agencies/MPOs. It doesn’t have to be this way. The San Joaquin Valley would like to engage in an effort to avoid these complex and oftentimes contrary results through the implementation of more flexible time lines and deadlines when it comes to air quality and transportation interactions.

Mr. Chairman, we also need a clear and comprehensive goods movement policy that provides resources to our regional planning organizations to evaluate the systemic nature of goods movement, recognize the distinctions in the type of goods we are moving and design our transportation and environmental solutions, we will become uncompetitive in the global marketplace to meet our needs. The projections for containers moving in and out of America’s ports are staggering, and container traffic expansion threatens to swamp port infrastructure. However, the movement of freight is an intermodal one. Containers move onto and off of port property and onto a variety of modes and face additional mobilization steps to move them from one region of the country to another.

The impacts of this on the highways, rail lines, near intermodal facilities and warehousing districts of local communities are huge and often ignored, because the impacts are not often in geographic proximity to the port itself. Intermodal facilities in San Joaquin County are 60 miles away from the Port of Oakland, but are essential to moving containers from ship, to truck, to rail. The impacts on grade crossings, highways, regional arterials and communities seemingly far from our nation’s ports of entries must be recognized and allowed to be mitigated as we address our crisis in goods movement. On top of this we often concentrate disproportionately on container movement and bulk cargo movement is little recognized. However, the shipment of agricultural goods overseas, (the number one export of California) is often done by bulk movement. The import of cement, steel rebar, and sulfur at the Port of Stockton is all done by bulk movement. These have their own challenges in moving from place to place that differs greatly from containers.

The National Association of Regional Councils (NARC) and its member organizations offer its assistance moving forward. Thank you for allowing me to submit these comments.