

House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Member Day Hearing

January 14, 2026

Testimony of Rep. Jill Tokuda

Thank you, Chairman Graves and Ranking Member Larsen, for holding today's Member Day hearing.

I represent Hawai'i's Second Congressional District, which spans the entire Hawaiian Archipelago.

From Hawai'i Island to Kaua'i and every neighbor island in between, transportation isn't a luxury, it's a lifeline for my constituents. For our island communities, transportation challenges go far beyond congestion or commute times.

They determine whether a kupuna (a senior) can get to a doctor's appointment, whether families can stay connected, and whether essential goods like food, fuel, and medicine can move reliably, safely, and affordably between communities.

EAS Reliability Act

This is one of the reasons why I continue to advocate for strengthening the Essential Air Service (EAS) program. EAS ensures rural and remote communities stay connected to the national air system. But when EAS falters, the consequences are immediate and severe.

Earlier this year, the carrier serving all four of our EAS routes in Hawai'i grounded its entire fleet without warning. Communities like Lāna'i, Hāna, Kamuela, and Kalaupapa were suddenly cut off. No flights, no backup aircraft, and no clear timeline for restoration.

For residents, that meant missed medical appointments, lost workdays, delayed government services, and people literally stranded on islands with no other way out.

And Hawai'i is not unique. Communities across the country have experienced similar disruptions when EAS carriers fail to manage risks and plan ahead for when things go wrong.

That is why I introduced the bipartisan EAS Reliability Act which would require carriers to have contingency plans for non-weather-related service disruptions. This is a commonsense fix. It does not expand the program or increase government spending. It simply strengthens accountability, improves reliability, and helps ensure that the federal investment in EAS delivers the connectivity rural communities depend on.

I want to thank Congressman Begich, my co-lead for this bill and a member of this Committee, for working with me on this legislation. Last month, we also sent a letter highlighting the importance of this legislation and asking T&I Committee leadership to include the EAS Reliability Act in any upcoming markup. A copy of that letter is included with this written

testimony. I respectfully ask the Committee to take up our bill so we can improve EAS for rural and remote communities across the country.

Surface Transportation Reauthorization Priorities

I also wanted to take this opportunity to highlight two important programs included in my requests to this Committee for the Surface Transportation Reauthorization bill.

First, we must reauthorize and improve the Ferry Service for Rural Communities Program. Hawai‘i is a non-contiguous island state with no connecting roads between islands. Yet current distance and eligibility requirements for this federal Ferry program make it nearly impossible for Hawai‘i to utilize.

I am advocating to allow local governments to participate directly in the program and to reduce the required sailing distance for non-contiguous states and territories. These changes would help rural island communities like those I represent develop inter-island ferry service and create much-needed transportation redundancy.

Second, I support the creation of a Hawai‘i Marine Highway System, modeled on the Alaska Marine Highway System. Alaska and Hawai‘i face similar challenges: geographic isolation, dependence on marine transportation, and high costs when systems fail. Yet only Alaska currently has parity in how federal-aid highway funds can be used for marine highways.

My proposal would give Hawai‘i the same support by allowing federal highway funds to be used for inter-island shipping infrastructure.

Pay for Air Traffic Controllers

Lastly, I want to highlight the impact of inadequate pay for Air Traffic Controllers. During the recent government shutdown, I met with ATCs across Hawai‘i. Setting aside the impacts of the shutdown, the concern I heard most was the inadequacy of the ATC pay scale.

Simply put, ATC pay is not keeping up. A growing number of controllers can’t afford to buy a house where they work, and this problem is especially pronounced in Hawai‘i.

I hope to work with this Committee to review controller compensation and ensure this profession can continue to attract the best and brightest.

Conclusion

Mahalo again for the opportunity to testify before this committee. I look forward to working with you to deliver for Hawai‘i and other rural and remote communities across the country.