



Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO

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**BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS & TRANSIT**

“America Builds: Highways to Move People and Freight”

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On behalf of both myself and the Transportation Trades Department, AFL-CIO (TTD), I want to thank Chairman Graves and Chairman Crawford, as well as Ranking Member Larsen and Ranking Member Norton for the opportunity to testify before the committee today.

The theme of this committee’s hearing is "America Builds," but what we're really talking about is *Americans* building. Our 37 affiliated unions represent millions of workers across the entire transportation sector, and there is no aspect of our highway system where you won't find members of TTD’s affiliated unions working. From the laborers and operating engineers who prepare the ground and lay the foundation, to the ironworkers who erect the steel beams of our bridges, our affiliates in the building trades are hard at work not only delivering on the promise of the 2021 infrastructure law’s generational investments in infrastructure, but simultaneously training the next generation of workers to meet increased demand. Skilled tradespeople keep those highways running smoothly, like the electricians who install and maintain the lighting while communication workers install and maintain fiber optic networks along highway corridors.

While I do understand that today's hearing is focused on highways, it's crucial to recognize that personal mobility and the movement of freight don’t operate in silos. The efficient movement of goods across America relies on a seamless, multimodal network. Our port workers, for example, are essential for unloading goods that arrive from overseas, but those goods often continue their journey on trucks traveling across our interstate system. Similarly, our rail workers transport massive amounts of freight, but those trains rely on well-maintained track, roads and highways to connect them to factories, warehouses, and distribution centers. In short, the success of our highway system is inextricably linked to the hard work of all transportation workers, regardless of their specific mode.

Just as our transportation network doesn't operate in silos, the strength of our national infrastructure should not be reduced to partisan politics or regional divisions. When those from rural or suburban areas oppose transit investments simply because they serve urban areas, or when those of us in cities in turn dismiss rural infrastructure projects because they seem distant from our daily lives, we do more than just harm specific communities. Worse, we further erode what very little is left

of the fundamental concept of our shared national purpose. This isn't just about infrastructure—it's about recognizing our shared stake in each other's prosperity and mobility, regardless of zip code or population density.

The reality is that while Congress can make binary choices about funding, our transportation network operates as a complex, interconnected ecosystem. When we deliberately underinvest in one part of this system whether it's urban transit or rural highways—we ultimately harm the whole. It's not unlike trying to affect one part of a river while ignoring the basic fact that water flows. The goods moving through our ports rely on both urban and rural infrastructure to reach their final destinations. The agricultural products from our heartland depend on both rural roads and urban rail hubs to reach domestic and international markets. So while it might feel politically expedient to pit urban needs against rural ones, or highways against transit, we're ultimately just undermining our own national interests and economic potential.

The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act

I know that some members of this committee were elected to Congress after the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) was signed into law in 2021. For those of you who were in Congress at the time, some basic math tells me most of you voted in opposition. Whether your objections stemmed from concerns over process, specific policy provisions, the overall scope of investment, or something else, I trust these were carefully considered positions and I'm not here to question them.

What I do question, though, is a decision made by President Trump to use his executive order, "Unleashing American Energy", to institute an immediate across-the-board pause on disbursing funds appropriated through the IIJA and the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA). It is one thing to oppose the bill and another thing entirely to throw a wrench into the federal government's responsibility to carry out this bipartisan accomplishment. By holding up all associated funds, even programs that have nothing to do with electric vehicles, until the Office of Management and Budget rubber-stamps that they are consistent with President Trump's energy goals, the administration could introduce all sorts of inefficiencies in project delivery, as the federal government is already deep into the grant-making process with state and local partners in most instances. Even if it takes doing so quietly and directly with the president, I hope you will exercise your oversight authority as members of the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to ensure that the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the law of the land that is already on its 4th year of implementation, continues to be implemented in its most effective form.

Going back to its founding in 1990, TTD has advocated for the kind of generational investment that would finally bring our transportation infrastructure into the 21st century. This advocacy wasn't about spending money for its own sake or supporting union jobs for the sake of supporting union jobs. It was rooted in the voices of the frontline transportation workforce—the actual eyes and ears of nearly the entire system. These workers, closer to the daily realities of our transportation infrastructure than anyone else, have sounded the alarm for years about crumbling bridges, outdated systems, insufficient capacity, and inefficiencies that turn routine operations into nightmares. They've told us what they've seen—on the ground, in the air, at our ports, and at sea—every single day. Their firsthand experiences have driven our call for change and shaped our vision for the future.

Thanks to the IIA, Americans are building in record numbers. In October 2024, the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) announced over 1.7 million construction and manufacturing jobs had been created over the prior four years, with more than 700,000 in transportation sector jobs, including pilots, port workers, bus drivers, rail engineers, and others.

The historic investments delivered by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) represent far more than just funding though—they represent a transformative moment for America's workers. Let me be clear: this was not simply another reauthorization of surface transportation programs. The IIJA stands as arguably the most pro-worker infrastructure law ever enacted, creating a foundation to rebuild America's shrinking middle class through good-paying union jobs across transportation, construction, rail, aviation, maritime, and manufacturing sectors.

The economic impact of these investments cannot be overstated. Beyond creating direct employment opportunities, federal infrastructure funding generates significant multiplier effects throughout our economy. When we invest in transportation infrastructure, we ensure businesses have access to labor, customers can reach commercial centers, and goods can move efficiently through our supply chains. This isn't simply public spending—it's a strategic investment that delivers demonstrable returns for communities across America.

But the success of the past four years extends beyond just the law itself. The Biden Administration has taken unprecedented executive actions to ensure these investments create and maintain good union jobs. Through executive orders and regulatory actions, it has strengthened Buy America requirements, expanded worker safety protections, and prioritized high-road labor standards in federal contracting. Under Secretary Buttigieg's leadership, the Department of Transportation has specifically tied infrastructure grants to strong labor protections, including project labor agreements and local hire provisions.

These combined legislative and executive actions have created a comprehensive framework that doesn't just fund infrastructure—it ensures these investments build career pathways into the middle class. By maintaining strong labor standards and worker protections, we're ensuring that federal dollars create the kind of family-supporting jobs that can sustain communities and strengthen our economy for generations to come.

And thanks to strong labor protections attached to these investments, and additional pro-labor and pro-worker policies enacted by the Biden Administration, these workers will enjoy fair wages and benefits, and in many cases, the security and dignity that comes with a good union contract

Public Transportation

When we talk about transit riders, we must remember we are talking about real people in your communities—workers heading to their jobs, students going to school, patients traveling to medical appointments, and families accessing grocery stores and other vital services. Public transportation delivers billions of dollars in value to American businesses in both major urban areas and rural communities. It reduces congestion on our already overcrowded roads and highways, lowering maintenance costs and improving commute times. It protects the health and well-being of our families by reducing dangerous emissions in our air. And critically, it provides essential mobility for millions of Americans who do not have access to a car and would otherwise struggle to meet their daily needs.

And while it seemed on shaky footing for a period of time, it has recently shown a period of tremendous growth and opportunity. The latest data from the American Public Transportation Association (APTA) shows that nationwide ridership is continuing to climb. Through the third quarter of 2024, total reported trips have already reached 1,966,663,700, which is a 2.3% increase over the same period last year. If that trend holds, we're on track to exceed 7.9 billion total trips for the year—that's a clear indication that more and more Americans are relying on public transit to get where they need to go. And as ridership grows, so too does the workforce that keeps our transit systems running.

This isn't just a trend; we're seeing it play out in major urban systems across the country. For example, the Milwaukee County Transit System in Wisconsin has seen ridership jump by an incredible 28.71% so far this year, with daily trips averaging over 1.9 million. And in Madison, Wisconsin, Metro Transit has seen a year-to-date increase of 1.17%, with average weekday trips reaching over 559,000.

These are just two examples, but they illustrate a powerful point: public transportation is not just a supplemental service; it's becoming increasingly essential to the economic and social vitality of our major metropolitan areas.

This surge in ridership directly contributed to a rise in transit employment. A 2025 Federal Transit Administration (FTA) report highlights that 10,000 new workers have entered the transit industry over the prior year, and salaries have increased more than \$1 billion. At the end of 2023, more than 388,000 people worked in public transportation, filling jobs in operations, maintenance and administration. This is a stunning turnaround in an industry that has been plagued by difficulties attracting and retaining talent and an aging workforce well above the national average.

Labor Priorities for Reauthorization

To build upon these successes, it's crucial to address labor challenges in rural transit systems:

1. **Workforce Development:** Investing in training programs is essential to equip transit workers with skills to operate and maintain evolving transit technologies. This ensures safety and efficiency in service delivery.
2. **Fair Labor Practices:** Ensuring competitive wages and benefits is vital to attract and retain qualified personnel in rural areas, where resources are often limited.
3. **Safety Standards:** Implementing comprehensive safety protocols protects both workers and passengers, fostering trust and reliability in transit services.
4. **Funding Stability:** Securing consistent federal funding allows for long-term planning and sustainability of transit operations, directly impacting labor conditions and service quality.

By addressing these labor priorities in the upcoming reauthorization, we can strengthen rural transit systems, ensuring they continue to serve as essential conduits for opportunity and well-being in rural America.

New Technology

The federal response to the deployment of new technology—the dangers it poses in operation on our national highway system and public roads, and the serious threat it poses to the safety of transportation workers—raises grave concerns about the rapid and reckless deployment of automated vehicles on our nation's roads. Transportation workers are already bearing the brunt of autonomous vehicle (AV) testing and deployment, with firefighters and police officers forced to jump out of the path of driverless vehicles moving through emergency cordons, bikeshare workers dodging vehicles that abruptly stop in bike lanes and crosswalks, and transit and sanitation workers being boxed in and trapped inside their vehicles by erratic autonomous vehicles. Construction and maintenance workers, who put their lives on the line every day on our roads, have witnessed driverless vehicles pull into active work zones with alarming frequency.

Rather than address these documented safety failures, the autonomous vehicle industry continues to push for expanded deployment while resisting basic safety standards and accountability measures. The industry's approach of treating our communities as their testing grounds while dismissing worker and public safety concerns is fundamentally at odds with responsible technology development. Their persistent demands for regulatory exemptions and resistance to data sharing requirements demonstrate a troubling prioritization of rapid deployment over public safety.

The proposed AV STEP program represents a dangerous abdication of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA's) regulatory responsibilities. By establishing a voluntary framework that relies heavily on industry self-certification and lacks meaningful enforcement mechanisms, NHTSA is effectively allowing AV companies to write their own rules. The program's failure to mandate worker protections, require transparency around safety incidents, or establish clear accountability measures makes it clear that NHTSA has chosen to prioritize industry convenience over its core mission of ensuring public safety. This approach is unacceptable and puts both workers and the broader public at unnecessary risk.

Let me be clear: while we embrace innovation in transportation, we will not accept the false promise of autonomous vehicles or unregulated third-party services as a solution to our transit challenges. Any deployment of new technology must maintain the highest safety standards, require qualified operators, and protect good union jobs. Similarly, we must strengthen worker protections across our transportation network. Adding labor representation to the Amtrak Board and the Intelligent Transportation Systems Advisory Committee isn't just about having a seat at the table—it's about ensuring the voices of frontline workers are heard when critical decisions are made about safety, operations, and the future of our transportation system.

These aren't just labor's priorities—they reflect the broader public interest in building a transportation system that works for everyone.

Buy America

TTD recognizes the vital role that Buy America and Build America, Buy America (BABA) policies play in fostering economic resilience and safeguarding strategic industries. By prioritizing domestic production of essential infrastructure components such as iron, steel, and manufactured products, these provisions reduce reliance on foreign supply chains and ensure that taxpayer-funded projects contribute to strengthening the U.S. industrial base. Industries critical to our

nation's future—such as transportation and green energy—stand to benefit significantly from these policies, with domestic production of components like electric vehicle (EV) chargers and zero-emission vehicle parts reinforcing supply chain stability and bolstering national security.

Buy America policies are more than economic incentives; they are tools for job creation and workforce development. They generate high-quality, union-supported jobs that ensure fair wages and safe working conditions for American workers. These policies also spur investments in workforce training programs, preparing the next generation of workers for opportunities in advanced manufacturing and green technologies. By connecting federal investments in infrastructure to the development of a skilled workforce, Buy America strengthens both our economy and the livelihoods of countless families.

Furthermore, BABA provisions align taxpayer spending with the nation's environmental and social values. By mandating compliance with U.S. labor and environmental standards, these policies prevent exploitation and unsafe practices often associated with overseas production. They also encourage sustainable manufacturing processes, contributing to the fight against climate change and supporting the nation's broader environmental goals. Infrastructure spending tied to these standards ensures that our investments do not come at the cost of human rights or ecological degradation.

Congressional oversight is essential to the success of these initiatives. As we approach the reauthorization of surface transportation programs in 2026, TTD urges Congress to ensure that federal agencies are adequately resourced to implement BABA provisions effectively and without delay. This includes providing the Department of Transportation with sufficient staffing to expedite waiver determinations, conduct supplier outreach, and collaborate with programs like the Manufacturing Extension Partnership (MEP) to identify domestic suppliers capable of meeting infrastructure needs. Additionally, Congress must reject efforts to weaken these policies and instead expand their application to emerging technologies and critical components, including batteries and upstream materials for zero-emission vehicles.

Finally, the waiver process must serve as a tool for continuous improvement. By issuing narrowly tailored, ad hoc project-specific waivers when necessary, agencies can identify gaps in domestic supply chains and send clear market signals to encourage capital investments. These data-driven insights can guide strategic investments in U.S. manufacturing capabilities, ensuring that future waivers become increasingly rare. The Biden-Harris administration has already demonstrated the success of this approach by phasing in Buy America coverage for EV chargers, leading to significant domestic investments. Building on this progress, the next administration must continue to refine and enforce BABA provisions while maintaining transparency and accountability to taxpayers.

TTD stands ready to collaborate with Congress and the administration to maximize the potential of Buy America and BABA policies. Together, we can ensure that these provisions fulfill their promise to strengthen U.S. supply chains, create good-paying jobs, and support a cleaner, more equitable future.

Rail

I want to emphasize the critical role our members play in operating, maintaining, and building America's passenger rail systems. The frontline workers we represent are the backbone of rail transportation in this country, and they stand ready to deliver the modern, world-class rail network that American communities deserve.

The IJA marks a transformative moment for passenger rail in America. With \$22 billion dedicated to Amtrak—the largest investment in the carrier's 50-year history—we are finally addressing decades of chronic underinvestment. This funding is already enabling critical maintenance work, fleet modernization, and the replacement of century-old infrastructure, while also restoring vital services like the Gulf Coast route that communities have gone without for far too long.

The American people have spoken clearly through their actions—they want more passenger rail service, not less. In 2024, Amtrak carried a record-breaking 32.8 million passengers and generated \$2.5 billion in ticket revenue. This 15% increase in ridership demonstrates that when we invest in reliable service and modern infrastructure, Americans will choose rail travel.

We stand at the threshold of a new era in American high-speed rail. In California, tracks are being laid for a system that will connect San Francisco to Los Angeles in under three hours. In Nevada, union workers have broken ground on Brightline West, which will link Las Vegas to Southern California. These projects represent more than just steel and concrete—they promise tens of billions in economic growth, millions fewer cars on our congested highways, and cleaner air for our communities.

The broad public support for expanded passenger rail service is overwhelming and undeniable. Recent polling shows that 92% of voters support expansion, while 83% specifically approve of the IJA's rail investments. Americans understand that passenger rail creates good jobs, connects rural and urban communities, reduces highway congestion, and makes travel more affordable and accessible.

Let me be clear: this is not the time to retreat from our commitment to passenger rail. Any reduction in funding through the upcoming surface transportation reauthorization would devastate the progress we've made and betray the clear will of the American people. While we welcome bipartisan support for transformative infrastructure projects, including recent statements from Sean Duffy before the Senate Commerce Committee reflecting President Trump's stated commitment to major infrastructure initiatives, what matters are not words, but actions—specifically, maintaining and expanding the federal investment needed to build a truly modern passenger rail network.

The choice before Congress is stark: we can build on this historic progress and deliver the 21st-century rail system Americans are demanding, or we can return to the failed policies of underinvestment that left us with crumbling infrastructure and inadequate service. TTD and our affiliated unions stand ready to work with Congress to ensure we choose the right path forward.

Conclusion

Three years ago, Congress met that challenge by enacting the IJJA. But today, not a full week into this new Congress, you are faced with a test of your own resolve—twice over. Once, to ensure that the law remains intact despite attempts to undermine its funding. And again, to meet its obligation to reauthorize vital surface transportation programs in the face of uncertainty and political gamesmanship. The stakes couldn't be higher: the future of America's infrastructure, workforce, and economic stability hangs in the balance.