

Statement of
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Hearing on Celebrating 50 Years:
The Eisenhower Interstate Highway System
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Introduction

Mr. Chairman, Members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to appear before you at today's hearing on celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Dwight D. Eisenhower System of Interstate and Defense Highways.

The creation of the Interstate System is one of the greatest public works projects in history. The importance of the Interstate System to our economy cannot be exaggerated. President Eisenhower wrote the following in his memoirs: "...more than any single action by the government since the end of the war, this one would change the face of America. Its impacts on the American economy – the jobs it would produce in manufacturing and construction, the rural areas it would open up – was beyond calculation." This year is an opportunity to recognize the importance of transportation to our economy and our way of life. It is also an opportunity to look ahead to the next 50 years.

Origins of the Interstate System

In the very early part of the last century, national highway policy was focused on getting farmers out of the mud and getting their produce to market. The Federal-aid highway program began in 1916 with that concept in mind, but it lacked a national focus. In 1921, the focus shifted as Congress reshaped the program to restrict Federal-aid to a limited, designated system totaling no more than 7 percent of each State's roads, with three-sevenths of this system being "interstate in character." Up to 60 percent of the funds could be used on these interstate roads as the Nation embarked on construction of its first interstate system—the name often used to describe it. By the late 1930s, there was a paved network of two-lane roads across the Nation, but its design and operation were inadequate for growing traffic volumes.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1938 directed the Bureau of Public Roads (BPR), the predecessor of the Federal Highway Administration, to study the feasibility of a toll-financed system of three east-west and three north-south superhighways. The 1939 study, entitled *Toll Roads and Free Roads*, rejected the idea of a toll network, but proposed a system of toll-free interregional highways, with connections to and around

cities. The network of highways would meet the needs of increasing automobile traffic and the requirements of national defense in time of war.

A subsequent report to Congress, entitled *Interregional Highways*, helped shape the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944, in which Congress directed the designation of a 40,000 mile “National System of Interstate Highways” by joint action of State highway agencies, subject to the approval of BPR. In 1947, BPR designated 37,681 miles of principal highways, including 2,882 miles of urban thoroughfares carrying the main line through cities. Construction of this system began in 1947, but without increased Federal support, many States did not pursue construction. Furthermore, road design standards were not uniformly applied. What was missing was a program to fund and build an interstate system with a uniform design.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1952 provided some support for the system by authorizing \$25 million with 50/50 Federal-State participation. However, when President Eisenhower assumed office in 1953, only 6,000 miles had been completed at a cost of \$955 million.

President Eisenhower’s Vision

President Dwight D. Eisenhower understood the value of roads. In 1919, he was aboard the U.S. Army’s first transcontinental convoy, a two-month journey from Washington, DC, to San Francisco, CA, to assess the readiness of military vehicles to make such a long trip and to promote good roads. The trip convinced the participants, which included military personnel, road advocates, and members of the press, of the country’s need for better roads. During and after World War II, the future President traveled on Germany’s Autobahn network of rural superhighways. President Eisenhower later noted “The old convoy had started me thinking about good, two-lane highways, but Germany had made me see the wisdom of broader ribbons across land.”

To address the Nation’s highway needs and build upon the progress of the 1930s and 1940s, President Eisenhower developed a “Grand Plan.” The “Grand Plan” is sometimes misunderstood as simply recommending the construction of the Interstate System; however, President Eisenhower’s vision was far grander. The “Grand Plan” envisioned each level of government – Federal, State, county, and municipal – contributing to the upgrade of the Nation’s entire road network over a 10-year period. The goal of the “Grand Plan” was a system to improve safety, reduce traffic jams, reduce traffic-related litigation, increase economic efficiency, and provide for the national defense. President Eisenhower appointed General Lucius D. Clay to head a committee, now known as the Clay Committee, to further develop the plan.

In 1955, President Eisenhower submitted the Clay Committee’s report to Congress, along with accompanying legislative proposals for financing construction of the Interstate System over a 10-year period. Despite widespread support for the concept, Congress rejected the Clay plan, which entailed \$25 billion in bonds and redirection of the gas tax to retire the debt. When legislation failed in 1955 because of financing issues,

observers predicted that such a sweeping and costly plan would not be passed in the presidential election year of 1956.

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956

President Eisenhower continued to urge approval of his legislative plan and worked with Congress to reach compromises that made approval possible. On June 26, 1956, Congress passed the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 (1956 Act). President Eisenhower, who had fought so hard for his vision, was in the final stages of recovery from surgery at Walter Reed Medical Center when he signed the Act on June 29, 1956, with no fanfare, no statement, and no photograph of the moment.

Despite the lack of ceremony, the 1956 Act resulted in landmark changes to the connectivity of highways in the U.S. and the way in which those highways are financed. Congress created today's Interstate System by expanding the system to 41,000 miles. The Act called for uniformity of design and signs to eliminate surprises that could lead to crashes. An extended authorization period was established to add certainty to the process to enable States to plan major highway projects to be completed over several years. The legislation also created a linkage between highway user tax revenue and highway expenditures.

The Highway Trust Fund was created as a dedicated revenue source for the Interstate System. Revenue from the Federal gas and other motor-vehicle user taxes was credited to the Highway Trust Fund to pay the Federal share of Interstate construction and all other Federal-aid highway projects. In this way, the Act guaranteed construction of all segments on a "pay-as-you-go" basis, thus satisfying one of President Eisenhower's primary requirements -- that the program be self-financing and not contribute to budget deficits. The 1956 Act set the Federal share for Interstate construction at 90 percent in recognition of the National scope of the project.

Impacts of the Interstate System

The Interstate System succeeded in achieving President's Eisenhower's vision of connecting our Nation. From the early years, highway engineers across the country built Interstate highways to match geographic and other challenges. The design of the Interstate System has not been static. The public and private partnerships that created the System adapted the highways to operational and safety experiences, criticism from the environmental community and safety advocates, and advances in bridge, pavement, and tunnel technologies. Through creativity and engineering expertise, each State built highways that, while uniform in some respects, were also unique to their setting. The close partnerships between Federal and State agencies and other stakeholders played an important role in establishing standards in design, operations, and safety.

Fifty years after the inception of the program, President Eisenhower's legacy has made America the most mobile society in history. Although the Interstate System comprises only 1 percent of the Nation's highways, it carries 24 percent of the Nation's

traffic. In 2004, Americans traveled approximately 267 billion vehicle miles on rural Interstate highway, 26 billion vehicle miles on “small urban” Interstate highways, and over 434 billion vehicle miles on urbanized Interstate highways. This mobility has led to an improved quality of life – more job opportunities and expanded choice on where to live.

The construction of the Interstate System also significantly expanded the reach of efficient truck movement. Highways are a key conduit for freight movement in the U.S., accounting for 71 percent of total freight transportation by weight and 80 percent by value in 1998. Freight transportation supports local businesses, interstate commerce, international trade, and provides Americans with access to goods and services. Today, transportation is woven into the economic fabric of the nation, and the Interstate System played a large role in establishing its importance.

One of the primary reasons for building the Interstate System was to improve the safety of the highway users: drivers, passengers, and pedestrians. Over the past 50 years, the Interstate System has done much to make highway travel safer and more efficient. Relative safety is measured by the “fatality rate” (fatalities per 100 million miles traveled, a measure used so data can be compared as traffic volumes change). The Interstate System is the safest road system in the country, with a fatality rate of 0.8—compared with 1.44 for all roads in 2004. This statistic is particularly noteworthy given that Interstate highways carry 26 times the traffic per mile as the rest of the road system.

When the Interstate construction program began in 1956, the national fatality rate was 6.05. This improvement in safety has been the result of many factors working together: the shifting of traffic onto the safer Interstate highways and technological advances in safety, such as wider shoulders; slid-resistant pavements; better guardrail, signing, and markings; better sight distances; and breakaway sign posts and utility poles. In addition, many other factors have contributed to improved safety on the Nation's highway system, including new vehicle safety features, such as safety glass, padded interiors, safety belts and air bags; programs to reduce impaired and aggressive driving; and the combined, coordinated efforts of many private organizations and public agencies working together to make the Nation's highways ever safer. Safer vehicles operating on safer highways also require safer driver behavior in order to deliver significant safety benefits. The most important life-saving action every State should take to achieve this is to pass a primary safety belt law. The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) resulted in the enactment an incentive grant program to encourage States to pass primary safety belt laws. Buckling up is not complex -- it's simple, it works, and it saves lives.

The 1956 Act officially named the Interstate System the “National System of Interstate and Defense Highways.” (In 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed legislation that would rename the Interstate System to honor President Eisenhower.) This name recognized that national defense was part of the justification for constructing the Interstate system. Indeed, the Interstate System has provided for defense access and

readiness, most recently with the mobilization prior to Operation Desert Storm, Operation Desert Shield, and Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Interstate System supports a growing economy, a strong national defense, and the vibrant American way of life. It is not only our safest highway network, but also the most flexible as it serves changing traffic, increasing freight needs, and evolving American goals. Since President Eisenhower, every President and each succeeding Congress has supported the Interstate System, including preservation of the taxpayers' investment in its construction.

Looking to the Future

As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Interstate System, we must think about the future. We must examine the remaining service life of Interstate highways and how to preserve and improve the system. As demand on the transportation system continues to increase, we must continue to find ways to protect and enhance the environment and be good stewards of the environment, while speeding up decisions and completion of vital transportation projects. The Federal-Aid Highway Program has been financed in the same way for 50 years. We need to broaden our thinking and move forward to address today's challenges. Instead of thinking of roads and bridges as liabilities, State and local governments need to think of infrastructure as an asset.

In many respects, our transportation system has become the victim of its own success. Our growing economy and standard of living have created a demand for travel and movement of goods that is increasingly difficult to meet. Congestion and delays have become a fact of life on our highways and in our airports and seaports. However, congestion is not an insurmountable problem. We must embrace new solutions in order to make meaningful progress in reducing congestion.

During National Transportation Week, Secretary Mineta launched the *National Strategy to Reduce Congestion on America's Transportation Network* -- a national congestion relief initiative designed to address the challenges ahead for our surface transportation system. This dynamic plan will maximize valuable tools Congress provided in SAFETEA-LU to improve operation of our surface transportation system, encourage the development and deployment of new technologies and construction methods, and expand opportunities for private investment in transportation infrastructure.

One of the most critical aspects of the *National Strategy* is reducing or removing barriers to private-sector investment in the construction and operation of transportation infrastructure. The Department will encourage more States to pursue private-sector investment opportunities. Major financial institutions and their clients are expressing increasing willingness to invest billions of dollars in roads. Furthermore, public-private partnerships (PPPs) can include incentives for system management and congestion relief, can make owners more accountable to users, and can lower the long-term costs of infrastructure maintenance and reconstruction. PPPs maximize the strengths of both the public and private sectors. It is time to take advantage of the private sector's flexibility,

innovation, creativity, expertise, and access to capital, while maintaining public oversight, accountability to taxpayers and long-term strategic planning.

The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, which is meeting today, is reviewing current methods and exploring alternatives for investing in and managing our surface transportation systems. The Commission is tasked with finding solutions that not only support the sustainability of financing surface transportation, but also reduce the costs of congestion.

We also must continue to keep highway safety as the top priority. Secretary Mineta has declared highway traffic deaths a “national tragedy.” It is unacceptable that over 43,000 people died on American roadways last year. SAFETEA-LU provided a comprehensive set of new and expanded tools for the U.S. DOT to use in working with States and other partners to improve highway safety through better safety data and analysis of crashes, development of strategic highway safety plans, and increased financial resources and flexibility to States to address their safety problems. Continuing this emphasis on a data-driven, comprehensive approach to safety will be critical to successes in the future.

Ours is unquestionably the most physically complex highway system in the world. Operational improvements will play a vital role in the future management of the system. The application of advanced technology or Intelligent Transportation Systems (ITS) is critical to address these operational issues. One example is the establishment of a national 3-digit telephone number for traveler information, 5-1-1, which gives callers information about local road and traffic conditions by dialing an easy-to-remember number, and our current efforts to promote the deployment of 5-1-1 services. As a result of these efforts, we expect 5-1-1 service to be available to half the nation by the end of this year. Services like 5-1-1 give motorists the information they need to make better choices about the routes they take, helping them save time by avoiding traffic tie-ups.

We must improve the efficiency of our transportation system by improving materials, contracting, and construction techniques. SAFETEA-LU includes \$75 million for the Highways for LIFE pilot program. The purpose of the program is to promote state-of-the-art technologies, elevated performance standards, and new business practices in the highway construction process. We believe that the Highways for LIFE pilot program will help to build highways faster, make them last longer, and make them safer.

Research also will play a vital role in improving and maintaining the Interstate System. Although SAFETEA-LU increases funding for Surface Transportation Research, Development, and Deployment, certain structural problems within research funding challenge the Department's ability to carry out the program Congress envisioned in Title V of SAFETEA-LU. Because all of the Title V funding for FY 2006 through 2009 is designated in statute for specific programs and projects, there is no flexible Title V research funding remaining for certain activities that are authorized by Congress, and that are important for a national program. The result is that across-the-board reductions are required each fiscal year in order to stay within authorized contract authority, and

many research activities underway in FY 2005 will be slowed or stopped. I would welcome an opportunity to answer your questions about the structural issues and program impacts, including risk to achieving our vision for the future.

Conclusion

The Interstate System has been the backbone of our economy for 50 years. It provides a vital connection between people, goods, and services and helps link U.S. markets with those around the world. The consistent network of roads, bridges and tunnels became a vehicle for freedom and helped our nation become the most mobile in history.

This year, we honor President Eisenhower's vision of a network of highways that brought America together and strengthened the national economy, but we also set the stage for the system's next 50 years. Our vision for the future focuses on reducing congestion and improving the system's capacity. With new building techniques, new financing methods, advanced system operations that include freight logistics, and new programs that improve construction and repair projects, we will continue President Eisenhower's legacy and keep America's highway system strong, safe, and efficient for the future.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify at this hearing commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Interstate System. I look forward to continuing to work with you as we move forward in shaping the next 50 years of our Nation's highway transportation system in support of the Nation's economic growth and our quality of life.

