

The Senate Budget: A Crucial Infrastructure Investment

Testimony of
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I. INTRODUCTION

Chairman Conrad, Ranking Member Gregg, and other budget committee members, I am pleased to be here today to discuss the importance of transportation infrastructure.

My name is Dr. Jill Hough and I serve as the director of the Small Urban & Rural Transit Center (SURTC) within the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute at North Dakota State University. I have conducted transportation research for 17 years.

Today I will touch on three themes relating to transportation infrastructure: 1) Growing senior population with a desire to age in place; 2) Needs assessment of road users in North Dakota; and 3) Difficulties with local funding mechanisms for infrastructure.

II. AGING IN PLACE

Advances in medicine and a declining birth rate are resulting in an aging U.S. population. In 1970, only about 10 percent of the U.S. population was older than age 65. In 2000, 35

million Americans (12.4 percent) were age 65 and older.¹ It is estimated that by 2010 the 65 and older population will total more than 40 million or 13 percent of the population. By the year 2030, this estimate increases to more than 71 million or approximately 20 percent of the population.

North Dakota's population in 2000 was 633,840, with 94,478 seniors. Studies indicate there is a tendency for people to stay where they are as they age ("aging in place"). Elderly populations are dispersed throughout the United States with 23 percent living in rural areas; 21 percent living in center city; and 56 percent living in the suburbs.² Thirty-one percent of the suburban population was between 35 and 54, and most plan to remain in the suburbs as they grow older.³ Americans age 65 and older are only one-fourth as likely to move after they retire as compared to the elderly Americans 30 years ago.⁴ Therefore we can expect the elderly population living in rural areas to remain in their homes as long as possible.

Individuals aging in rural areas may face greater challenges than their peers in larger urban locations. The trends occurring in rural areas, with the exodus of the young,

¹ U.S. Census Bureau. (2005). *State Interim Population Projections by Age and Sex: 2004 – 2030*. <http://www.census.gov/population/www/projections/projectionsagesex.html>, accessed April 2, 2007

² Rosenbloom, S. (2003). *The Mobility Needs of Older Americans: Implications for Transportation Reauthorization*. Center on Urban and Metropolitan Policy, The Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C.

³ Frey, W. (1999). "Beyond Social Security: The Local Aspects of an Aging America." (Washington: Brookings Institution). www.brookings.edu/es/urban/publications/freysocialsecurity.pdf, accessed March 6, 2006

⁴ Rosenbloom, S. (2003). *Op. cit.*

reduced tax base, and aging infrastructure, may deplete or greatly reduce the availability of resources necessary for the elderly population in rural areas to remain in their homes. The trend of removing services (for example, fewer clinics) from rural areas produces challenges for the elderly people who tend to need medical services more frequently as they age. The challenges presented by this trend are made even more difficult because of some of the driving conditions on the way to these more distant destinations. North Dakota has more roads per capita than any other state in the nation. The state, counties, and townships face challenges maintaining their roads and in instances have declared some roads “minimum maintenance,” meaning they are rarely serviced and do not have winter service such as snow removal. As a consequence, rural residents must travel farther to reach medical services and purchase groceries and often travel on poorer roads.

Our society has a high reliance on the automobile primarily because of the independence private vehicles allow us to go where we want when we want.⁵ The elderly are aging without giving up mobility. A 70 year old today travels more than a 70 year old did 20 years ago. Nationally, people make an average of 4.1 trips per day. Daily trip counts vary by age and a person’s status as a licensed driver. People age 25-54 make an average of 4.6 trips per day while people age 65 and older average 3.4 trips per day. The rural elderly and urban elderly make approximately the same number of daily trips but the

⁵ Newbold, et al (2005). “Travel Behavior within Canada’s Older Population: A Cohort Analysis.” *Journal of Transport Geography*, 13: 340-351.

rural elder travels greater distance (26 miles per day while the elderly living in urban locations travel 18.7 miles).⁶

III. Needs Assessment of Road Users in North Dakota

In the year 2000, North Dakota road users (agricultural producers, commuters, and school bus drivers, n=379) were surveyed regarding their perceptions of road maintenance, physical roadway elements that limit or reduce normal operating speed, and the unusual wear and tear on vehicles as a result of the local road network conditions.⁷ Responses were solicited regarding acceptable funding mechanisms to make road improvements.

Results revealed poor ratings by about 30 percent of road users with unpaved roads receiving a larger portion of poor ratings. Elements, which may include cracks in pavement and pot holes in paved roads and/or loose gravel and/or washboard conditions on unpaved roads, were reported to affect the travel speed as well as to cause excessive wear and tear to vehicles. Road maintenance received poor ratings from approximately 45 percent of the road users (37 percent poor for paved roads and 65 percent poor on unpaved).

Road users (n=276) clearly rejected increasing property taxes to fund road improvements.

There was minimal acceptance for increasing fuel tax (22 percent) and an acceptance of increasing sales tax (40 percent).

⁶ Pucher and Renne. (2005). "Socioeconomic of Urban Travel: Evidence from the 2001 NHTS." *Transportation Quarterly*, 57(3):165-186.

⁷ Hough, J. et al. (2003). *An Assessment of Regional Road User Needs in Three Rural States*. MPC Report 03-140, Mountain Plains Consortium, North Dakota State University.

IV. Difficulties with Local Funding Mechanisms

Rural or lower density areas are generally at a disadvantage when it comes to infrastructure because there are fewer people to pay for the development and maintenance of the infrastructure. Federal and state support is necessary for development and maintenance of this infrastructure.⁸

With reluctance of road users wanting to increase property taxes, identifying acceptable mechanisms can be a difficult task. Several criteria need to be considered such as ease of collection, revenue certainty, inflation sensitivity, public acceptance, and user equity.

When consulting these criteria, most traditional as well as innovative methods face difficulty where population densities are low.

V. Conclusion

The local roads are important to support mobility of people and goods and that mobility is critical to economic development in rural areas. The infrastructure also has the added social benefit of maintaining mobility for those choosing to live in rural or small urban areas.

⁸ Hull. (2003). *A Rural Policy for the 21st Century: Report from the Proceedings of the 2003 Southern Legislative Conference Rural Forum*. www.slcatlanta.org/publications/AgRD/Ruralpolicy21stCentury.pdf, accessed March 24, 2008.