

CARLETON COLLEGE

A Letter in Support of a Holistic Federal Surface Transportation Bill to Senator Amy Klobuchar

Date: March 2, 2010
To: Senator Amy Klobuchar
From: Logan Nash and Charlotte Turovsky
Student Leader for Proposal: Logan Nash

The Honorable Amy Klobuchar
302 Hart Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator Klobuchar,

We are writing to urge you to support a federal surface transportation bill outlining a vision for forward-looking and sustainable transportation in the United States. As residents of rural Northfield, on the fringe of the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area, we have seen both great successes and wasted opportunity in transportation policy. While the construction of the Hiawatha light rail line in Minneapolis has made moving around the Twin Cities more convenient and affordable, plans to extend commuter rail to our own walkable and vibrant community have repeatedly fallen through. Although we can bike downtown to the grocery store or walk to a cafe to meet a friend, current transportation policy ignores the benefits of planning transit around older rural towns like ours and leaves few options for those without a car commute to and from Northfield. We hope you will agree with us that it is time we envision our federal policy so that a variety of transportation options are effectively delivered to those who need it the most—regardless of where they live.

Americans are increasingly turning to public transportation as an affordable and convenient way of getting around. In 2008, there were a record 10.7 billion trips on public transit, the highest level in 52 years.¹ Since 1995, use of public transportation has increased by 38 percent, while during the same period, highway usage only increased by 21 percent.² Federal policy has historically focused on highways and car ownership. However, owning and maintaining a car is expensive, especially for individuals working minimum wage jobs. Multimodal transportation systems afford individuals choice when deciding how to get from one place to another. Transportation options enable Americans to choose how to get to work, school, or other locations based on cost and convenience. In fact, Americans who live in close proximity to public transportation collectively save 646 million hours of travel time and 398 million gallons

¹ Virginia Miller, “10.7 Billion Trips Taken On US Public Transportation in 2008—Highest Level in 52 Years; Ridership Increased as Gas Prices Decline and Jobs Were Lost,” American Public Transportation Association, March 9, 2009.

www.apta.com/mediacenter/pressreleases/2009/Pages

² Miller.

of fuel annually.³ According to a January 2010 report released by the American Public Transportation Association (APTA), individuals who ride public transportation save an average of \$770 a month.⁴

The environmental costs of auto-centrism are becoming increasingly apparent. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, private vehicles produce 36 percent of transportation emissions annually in the United States (compared to two percent produced by rail service and one percent by buses).⁵ But, by eliminating one vehicle and walking or using public transportation instead, a formerly two-car family can reduce their own carbon footprint by up to 30 percent.⁶

Public transportation is a great asset for those privileged to live in close proximity to safe, reliable, and pleasant commuting options. However, individuals and families who do not live within walking distance of transit and amenities are not afforded this choice. In 2003, 71.8 percent of the working poor drove to work, while only 5.9 percent used public transportation.⁷ These low-income drivers are forced to spend an average of 8.4 percent of their income on commuting costs compared to only 3.8 percent for other commuters.⁸ Transportation is an issue of equity. If individuals do not have access to services within walking distance or public transportation, they will be forced to drive, even for short trips.

Despite the increasing realization that well-planned transit growth is crucial for our nation's commuters, communities, and environment, federal transportation policy lags behind. Rather than forging ahead with new legislation, the Obama administration has elected to extend the Bush-era "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users" (SAFETEA-LU) Act, which focuses on highway subsidies and lacks a clear plan for a more sustainable, multimodal transportation future. The SAFETEA-LU plan also lacks a way to address the current transportation funding crisis. Declining gas tax revenues are draining the Highway Trust Fund, used to finance transportation projects, to the point of requiring an infusion from the general budget.⁹ While such stopgap measures may be necessary in the immediate term, the United States cannot afford to ignore the growing demand for a more holistic, environmentally and socially friendly transportation policy. Small steps forward taken in the SAFETEA-LU Act, such as the New Starts program, have worked to foster transit success stories like Minneapolis's Hiawatha Line light rail, but their scope is still too limited. Fortunately, Minnesota's own Representative Jim Oberstar, chairman of the House Transportation and

³ "Facts on Public Transportation," American Public Transportation Association, www.publictransportation.org/facts

⁴ Mantill Williams, "Riding Public Transit Saves Individuals \$9,242 Annually," American Public Transportation Association, January 12, 2010. http://www.publictransportation.org/facts/100112_transit_savings.asp

⁵ "Transportation and Climate Change: A Critical Linkage," Transportation for America. http://t4america.org/policybriefs/t4_policybrief_climate.pdf

⁶ "Transportation and Climate Change: A Critical Linkage."

⁷ Elizabeth Roberto, "Commuting to Opportunity: The Working Poor and Commuting in the United States," The Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings, March 14, 2008, 8.

http://www.brookings.edu/reports/2008/0314_transportation_puentes.aspx

⁸ Roberto, 7.

⁹ Congressional Budget Office, "The Budget and Economic Outlook: Fiscal Years 2010 to 2020," January, 2010. <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/108xx/doc10871/Frontmatter.shtml>, Appendix D

Infrastructure Committee, is a champion of progressive transportation policy and has created a draft transportation bill with just such a vision.

Oberstar's draft embeds principles of livability into federal policy, ensuring that federal funding goes to transit and highway projects that offer Americans greater transportation options. For instance, the bill makes crucial changes to the popular New Starts/Small Starts transit grants program. Initiated under SAFETEA-LU, Bush-administration policy had burdened these initiatives with a narrowly defined Cost-Effective Index (CEI) requirement. This guideline failed to take into account the potential for transit to invigorate and enliven areas around stations, encouraging transit-oriented development, business investment, and other environmental and social benefits that help communities reap massive dividends from transit investment.¹⁰ We in the Twin Cities metro area have seen these effects firsthand on the Hiawatha Line, where station-area redevelopments have helped ridership levels consistently shatter expectations.¹¹ This January, Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood reversed the short-sighted CEI restriction, asserting that “we want to base our decisions on how much transit helps the environment, how much it improves development opportunities and how it makes our communities better places to live.”¹²

Oberstar's draft goes even further; it simplifies the long review process for grants so that municipalities no longer need to wait ten years to fund projects that address current problems.¹³ Furthermore, a reformed Office of Intermodalism would coordinate distribution of these and other federal funds so that transit and highway money is distributed with an eye towards efficient growth and user choice. New funding guidelines would also allocate more money to much-needed rural transit systems and give towns such as Northfield a more equitable role in statewide planning decisions. Oberstar's vision is a long-overdue restructuring of how we think about transportation planning in this country.

Despite its forward-thinking agenda, Representative Oberstar's bill does not address the dire federal transportation funding situation. The growing national emphasis on alternative fuels, hybrid vehicles, and green transportation has led to declining gas tax revenues. Alternative funding methods such as a Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) tax are unpalatable due to feasibility and privacy issues. To cope, the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission has recommended that the federal gas tax be raised. While this is not the ideal long-term solution, our nation's transportation infrastructure cannot wait until the Highway Trust Fund runs dry and we are forced to deal with this crisis on unfavorable terms. We agree with the Commission that any future surface transportation legislation should raise the gas tax to create a stable source of funding for these necessary projects.

¹⁰ Roderick B. Diaz, “Impacts of Trail Transit on Property Values” (paper presented at The Commuter Rail/Rapid Transit Conference Sponsored by the American Public Transportation Association, Toronto, Ontario, May, 1999).

¹¹ Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, “Regional Transit Ridership: Up Again in 2008,” January, 2009.
<http://www.metrocouncil.org/directions/transit/transit2009/RidershipJan09.htm>

¹² Paul Griffio, “Obama Administration Proposes Major Public Transportation Policy Shift to Highlight Livability” United States Department of Transportation, January 13, 2010.
http://www.fta.dot.gov/news/news_events_11036.html

¹³ Stephen Lee Davis, “What does Oberstar's proposal do for the New Starts transit program?” Transportation for America, June 18, 2009.

<http://t4america.org/blog/2009/06/18/what-does-oberstars-proposal-do-for-the-new-starts-transit-program/>

Effectively planned transportation increases an area's livability, decreases commuting costs, gives users choice, and reduces our carbon footprint. Isn't it about time our federal transportation policy prioritized these goals? We encourage you to work with Representative Jim Oberstar and your legislative colleagues in furthering this goal of a holistic federal transportation policy.

Sincerely,
Logan Nash, Carleton College '11
Charlotte Turovsky, Carleton College '11