U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
Washington, DC 20515

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June 24, 2009

The President
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20050

Dear Mr. President:

We write, as Democratic Members of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure of the House of Representatives, to express our profound disappointment in your Administration's proposal to extend the current surface transportation programs for 18 months (through March 31, 2011). Your proposal fails to acknowledge the severity and urgency of the challenges facing the nation's surface transportation system at this critical time. It will lock us into the discredited policies of the past and prevent us from moving toward the transportation system of the future.

Numerous recent reports, including those of the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission and the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission, have detailed the deteriorating quality of our transportation system. Decades of underinvestment have taken their toll. Almost 61,000 miles on the National Highway System are in poor or fair condition; more than 152,000 bridges – one of every four bridges – are structurally deficient or functionally obsolete; and more than 32,500 public transit buses and vans have exceeded their useful life.

The problems are immense; the solutions, while complex, are at hand. The Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure has prepared for nearly three years to write legislation to provide clear national transportation objectives and the investments necessary to ensure Americans have a surface transportation system to meet their needs in the 21st Century. The legislation that we have crafted delivers on what your Administration has said it wants: change – transformation of the current programs, a metropolitan mobility and access initiative to reduce congestion and greenhouse gas emissions, accountability for how Federal transportation dollars are spent, and increased livability for our communities. In addition, our bill builds upon the investment in high-speed rail, which you included in the Recovery Act, with a high-speed rail title. Our bill also creates a National Infrastructure Bank to better leverage transportation dollars. In total, this legislation will create or sustain six million family-wage jobs.

We owe it to future generations to act now, not in two or three years. Every day that we wait for reform, lives are lost in motor vehicle crashes. Every week we delay, more parents are stuck in traffic trying to pick up a child at school. Each lost month, the economy suffers and inefficiencies grow. And every year that we fail to act, the cost of reform becomes more expensive.

The Administration's business-as-usual approach, with multiple extensions passed before enactment of a new multi-year highway, highway safety, and transit authorization act, is unacceptable. That is the failed experience of the past. An 18-month extension of current law and temporary restoration of the Highway Trust Fund will leave States without the certainty and reliable funding source that they need to plan, design, and construct significant multi-year highway and transit projects. States will slow investments – as they have done during past extensions – and this slowdown will offset much of the benefit of the increased transportation investment provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (P.L. 111-5).

We have a significant opportunity to address the long-term issues impacting our highways, and transit systems and a drawn-out, piecemeal approach to fixing our transportation network will not work.

We are ready. We have a transformational bill. We will move it through our Committee. We hope to work with your Administration; we have requested and continue to welcome your input and participation in finalizing this important legislation in the weeks ahead.

Sincerely,

James L. Oberstar

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