

The Honorable Edward Markey  
255 Dirksen Senate Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20510

May 14, 2020

Subject: Federal Transportation Policy in the Context of Recovery and Reauthorization

Dear Senator Markey:

Our organizations share the goal of improving the Commonwealth's transportation system in a way that also contributes to the state's economic recovery from COVID-19. Federal, state, and local governments all have important roles to play in addressing our state's transportation challenges, but the scale of the current public-health and economic crisis underscores the importance of your leadership at the federal level.

We are grateful for the provision of the CARES Act that dedicated \$25 billion to public transportation across the country. Massachusetts will receive more than \$1 billion of that funding, which will help sustain the MBTA and the Regional Transit Authorities that serve riders in every corner of the state. Public transit authorities are playing a vital economic and public-health role in transporting essential workers and making possible essential trips during this crisis. We would support additional funding being directed to transit agencies as part of a further phase of stimulus legislation.

As you consider additional federal action, we ask that you keep in mind that the transportation status quo before COVID-19 was neither efficient nor equitable. Building a future that is more fair and more prosperous will require policy changes at all levels of government, which means that Congress must think differently about the role the federal government plays in advancing transportation nationwide. Whether your next step on transportation is through additional stimulus/recovery legislation or reauthorization of the federal surface transportation bill, which expires in September of this year, we urge you to consider these principles:

- **Stimulus funding should support projects that maximize jobs.**

A recent study by Smart Growth America and Transportation for America determined that stimulus spending resulting from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) in 2009 produced 70 percent more job hours when spent on transit than when spent on highway projects. Dollars that are spent on roads should be focused on repair, as repair and maintenance projects produce 16 percent more jobs per dollar than for new road construction. Congress should also think beyond the term "shovel ready," which describes projects that may not be forward-looking. For example, the 2009 ARRA legislation did not allow funds to be used for planning and design of potential projects. This hindered the redesign of streets to improve safety, or the implementation of

“complete streets” projects that include safe sidewalks, dedicated bus lanes, and protected bicycle lanes.

- **Fix it first.**

Federal transportation legislation has traditionally favored expansion over maintenance, leaving state and local government with large maintenance deficits. Between 2009 and 2014, states spent \$21.3 billion annually to build new roadways and add highway lanes, while spending only slightly more -- \$21.4 billion annually -- repairing the existing road system. During that time, the percentage of our roads in poor condition nationwide increased from 14 percent in 2009 to 20 percent in 2018. As a nation, it is like we are adding an addition to our house instead of fixing our leaky roof. Congress must prioritize the repair and rehabilitation of existing highway and road infrastructure -- and the improvement of roads to modern “complete streets” -- over the creation of new infrastructure.

- **Rethink historic funding ratios between transit and highways.**

The next reauthorization should make sustainable transportation a priority by funding transit at the same levels as highways, providing a higher federal cost-share for transit projects, and providing federal operating support for transit agencies. Massachusetts is a transit-rich state that stands to benefit from providing transit with a larger slice of the funding pie. In the current authorization of the FAST Act, over \$40 billion is guaranteed to states for highways, which states may spend on expansion even while neglecting their repair needs. By contrast, only \$2.6 billion is available for new public transit capital projects, and this funding is not guaranteed each year. While the federal government will cover 80 percent of the cost of a highway project, it will only pay for up to 50 percent of the cost of a transit project. This status quo hurts Massachusetts and other states that rely on strong transit systems to support their economies.

- **Focus on policies that advance accessibility, equity, and the environment.**

For too long, the nation’s transportation system has been a barrier to economic opportunity, perpetuated and exacerbated inequity, and harmed the environment. The COVID-19 crisis has exposed the impacts of that “old normal.” Transportation is the largest source of air pollution in Massachusetts, and the largest contributor to climate change both in the Commonwealth and across the nation. Recent studies have shown that air pollution may be a key contributor to COVID-19 mortality rates. Communities of color in Massachusetts have 26 to 36 percent higher exposure to particulate matter as a result of vehicle emissions, and black bus riders spend 64 hours more per year on MBTA buses than do their white counterparts. Many rural communities across Massachusetts have no public transit at all, making it incredibly difficult for many residents to access a job, school, groceries, or health care. Federal policy must focus first on addressing these fundamental inequities before simply pouring more money into programs that make these problems worse.

- **Allow cities and towns to directly access stimulus funds**

By allowing some of the federal stimulus dollars to flow directly to cities and towns, Congress can help catalyze important investments in local bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure. We have already seen an increase in walking and biking as a means of commuting and recreation, and anticipate this trend will continue in the future. Furthermore, it is important that there is flexibility in these dollars so that municipalities can collaborate on regional transit investments and continue to invest in innovative transit corridor projects.

Instilling these principles in federal policy will require moving beyond decades-old funding formulas and time-worn approaches that have failed Massachusetts residents and perpetuated an inequitable and inefficient status quo. It is time for a different approach that puts the above principles at the center of federal action.

We look forward to working with you on this important challenge. Please contact us if you feel that we can be helpful as allies, advocates, and partners with you in this important work.

Thank you again for your leadership.

Sincerely,

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