



Investing in Our Nation's Transportation Infrastructure

On both a state and national level, our economy depends on an efficient and affordable transportation system. For centuries our transportation system has been the backbone of our economy, and we are indebted to the visionaries, like Thomas Jefferson, Teddy Roosevelt, and Dwight Eisenhower, who recognized the importance of a national transportation plan and had the courage to put that plan into action. Our ability to get goods to market and move people safely and efficiently from place to place has made our economy the greatest in world history. But today that system is aging, reaching the end of its life in many cases or being stretched beyond what was originally intended. Investing in our infrastructure is necessary for economic recovery and long-term, sustainable economic growth.

Surface Transportation Reauthorization:

Highway users pay for the maintenance and improvements on our nation's roads and transit systems through user fees, often referred to as the "gas tax." All the money collected from these user fees goes into the Highway Trust Fund, which is used specifically to finance surface transportation improvements and nothing else. In recent years, however, the existing gas tax has been proven insufficient as a funding source, in part because the gas tax was not indexed for inflation and in part because of unexpected drops in receipts as gas prices have risen and fuel efficiency standards have increased. The federal-aid highway system provides vital economic development, safety improvements, and good jobs, and it requires a dedicated source of funding.

SAFETEA-LU, the law governing our nation's surface transportation system, including federal-aid highways, bridges, and mass transit systems, expires at the end of this fiscal year, and Congress will likely consider legislation to reauthorize these programs during the 111th Congress. Many important issues will be addressed during debate on reauthorization, including how to fund these programs in a sustainable way into the future.

Rail Transportation:

Passenger rail has proved a worthwhile investment in countries all over the world, and I strongly believe that we must work to make rail travel a reality for Americans again. At a time when they are faced with high transportation and energy costs and deepening economic uncertainty, Americans must have alternative ways to travel, whether they are commuting to work or traveling for pleasure. Ensuring that our passenger rail system is viable for the future is critical, and I believe that we must look at options that will provide feasible passenger rail service across the U.S.

This is why, during the 110th Congress, I supported legislation to reform and reauthorize Amtrak. This legislation calls on the private sector to partner with Amtrak to provide viable passenger rail service across the U.S. In particular, the bill focuses on the development of a true high speed rail corridor in the Northeast that can prove as a model for successful passenger rail systems in the rest of the country. In addition, the bill improves Amtrak operations and passenger rail service by providing grants to states for innovative passenger rail projects, allowing private operators to launch a pilot program for new passenger service on freight-owned tracks on the worst performing Amtrak lines, and requiring the federal government to work with the states and railroads in planning rail infrastructure.

I was very pleased that this law takes steps to reinstate the Pioneer Route, which ran through southern Idaho from Seattle to Chicago but was unfortunately discontinued in 1997. The law requires Amtrak to evaluate reopening the Pioneer Route, and I am working with Senator Crapo to encourage Amtrak to re-incorporate southern Idaho routes into its system at the earliest possible opportunity.