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October 17, 2003

The Honorable Richard Shelby
Chairman
Subcommittee on Transportation and Treasury
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray
Ranking Minority Member
Subcommittee on Transportation and Treasury
U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senators Shelby and Murray:

On behalf of a broad coalition of interests, we are writing to share our views on the Fiscal Year 2004 Transportation, Treasury and Independent Agencies Appropriations bill. Specifically, our concerns focus on the following programs and activities within the U.S. Department of Transportation: Amtrak, the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute Program, the National Scenic Byways Program, the New Starts Program and FTA staffing.

Amtrak – We thank you for the Committee's efforts to find additional resources to increase funding commitments to Amtrak, particularly now as Amtrak's President David Gunn continues to make improvements to the nation's passenger rail system. We urge you to preserve or even increase the funding level the Committee bill provides for Amtrak, calling for \$1.346 billion plus deferral of the \$100 million loan provided by U.S. DOT. The House position recommends \$900 million for FY'04, a level that would terminate Amtrak's heavy maintenance program and restart the decline in equipment and service quality that Gunn has successfully reversed.

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Our organizations strongly support Amtrak's full request of \$1.812 billion, including repayment of the loan, so the remaining gap between the Committee's level and Amtrak's request is still \$366 million. As you work to develop the final agreement on Amtrak's funding level for FY'04, we would encourage you to consider additional measures to help close this gap.

Amtrak is an important part of our nation's transportation system. With annual ridership of about 23.5 million, it serves stations in 46 states and is used by travelers from all 50 states and overseas visitors accustomed to riding trains back home. Amtrak provides essential capacity in several congested corridors. Nationwide, it is vital for many who live in communities with little or no public transportation, do not want to fly, or are medically unable to fly. For the March-September period, ridership on the long-distance trains was up 15% over the year-earlier months. Finally, about one million trips a day are made on commuter trains that Amtrak operates under contract or that use Amtrak-owned infrastructure. We strongly urge you to hold or improve on the funding level approved by the Committee, and to oppose any attempts that seek to reduce funding commitments to Amtrak.

Jobs Access and Reverse Commute Program – We also want to express our strong support for the \$125 million funding level that the Senate bill provides for the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute Program (JARC). It is important that the Senate's level of funding be maintained during Conference Committee deliberations, particularly as we prepare for the reauthorization of the TEA-21. Already, JARC's funding level has slipped below the guaranteed funding level of \$150 million that TEA-21 set for FY'03. The House position, which calls for \$85 million for FY'04, is more than 40 percent below the TEA-21-established baseline. The House level threatens continued funding for about 60 programs, resulting in many more projects being cut or eliminated, and it diminishes ongoing efforts to raise JARC funding levels in legislation renewing TEA-21.

The Job Access and Reverse Commute (JARC) program is an enormously successful program that was created in response to the 1996 welfare reform law to help welfare recipients and low-income workers access jobs, childcare and related services. The JARC program has been particularly popular in the business, social service, and transit communities and has served as a needed catalyst for the coordination of transportation and human service programs. This relatively modest level of funding supports scores of locally developed, welfare-to-work projects across the nation, at a time when Congress is seeking to renew the federal welfare law placing a greater emphasis on work requirements for welfare participants. We recognize that many state and local budgets are constrained, making this modest investment of federal resources all the more necessary.

National Scenic Byways Program – We appreciate your Committee's decision to avoid earmarking of the National Scenic Byways Program, which is in contrast to the House-passed version that earmarked the entire \$26.5 million. The House position eliminates the merit-based grant selection process established by statute. We should give those states that have submitted grant projects an opportunity to receive funding as your bill provides. Please work to retain the Senate position, thereby eliminating all earmarking from this Program.

The National Scenic Byways Program, which was created in 1991, has produced significant benefits for the nation's transportation, tourism, recreation and environmental programs for a very modest investment. There are now 75 National Scenic Byways and 20 All American Roads in 39 states, including nine multi-state byways. Hundreds of competitive grants have been awarded under criteria established by Congress under ISTEA. Grant applications have historically exceeded funding by more than 2:1. Successful grant applications have been projects of outstanding merit and national significance. Today, there are 310 applications from 42 states representing a total of \$81.9 million waiting for consideration by FHWA. The Senate Committee bill ensures that good faith applicants who have played by the rules are given the opportunity to receive full consideration of their requests.

New Starts – We especially want to express our appreciation for your actions in Committee to respond to several key issues affecting the Federal Transit Administration's New Starts program, from an increase in funding to report language correcting an interpretation that would have limited to a total of \$25 million section 5309 funding for alternatives analysis, preliminary engineering and final design. In addition to raising additional resources to meet the strong demand for new starts investment, the Senate's report language ensures that a dozen or more new start projects will not be disrupted. We urge you to protect the funding level and this report language as you develop a final conference agreement.

We also wanted to call your attention to areas of the House report on the legislation that we believe would unduly burden the new starts program, effectively dismissing the substantial work that was done in TEA-21 to establish a strong project review and evaluation process for the New Starts program. These TEA-21 changes are delivering more timely and smarter transit projects. The House report calls for a number of changes in existing policies, issues that, at the least, should be taken up by the respective Senate and House authorizing committees during deliberations on TEA-21 renewal. It is our view that the House report directs FTA to make numerous substantive changes to the new starts project review and evaluation process and existing funding policies. These changes include: disqualifying alternative analysis for federal funding; directing FTA to consider only the lowest cost alternative, even if the locally preferred alternative is not that project; directing FTA to require project sponsors to capture station-by-station information and determine the cost-effectiveness of each station; and setting a 50/50 matching share for new starts. We believe that these and other report items should be debated as part of the TEA-21 reauthorization process. These House report items affecting the New Starts program should be deleted from the final conference report on the bill.

FTA Staffing – We are also concerned about proposed House funding levels for staffing at the Federal Transit Administration. These funding cuts are likely to result in personnel reductions that will make it difficult, if not impossible, for FTA to support an expanding partnership for investment in public transportation. The growth in public transit ridership, including associated system expansions and upgrades in services, is the most significant achievement of the TEA-21 period. We should not place this progress at risk with staff reductions for an agency that is already lean and overburdened, disrupting capacities that would further slow down vital transit projects moving through the federal process.

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Thank you for your assistance on these issues as you work to develop a final agreement on the FY'04 Transportation, Treasury and Independent Agencies Appropriations bill.

Sincerely,



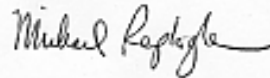
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America Bikes



Scott Bernstein
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Michael Repogle
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