

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

November 17, 2003

Representative Thomas Petri
Chair
Subcommittee on Highways,
Transit and Pipelines
United States House of Representatives
B-370 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Representative William Lipinski
Ranking Member
Subcommittee on Highways
Transit and Pipelines
United States House of Representatives
B-370 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Petri and Ranking Member Lipinski:

We are writing as members of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus (CHC), Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus (CAPAC), and the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) to express our concerns regarding the reauthorization of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21). TEA-21 and its predecessor, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), provided critical tools to address transportation challenges that continue to disproportionately impact minority communities. While dedicated funding for transit, air quality improvements, community enhancements, and specific requirements for public participation in the transportation planning process have helped our communities and constituencies, barriers to economic opportunity, environmental justice, and citizen engagement still persist and must be addressed in the next transportation law. As Congress considers this legislation, we urge you to honor our request to expand funding and programs that ensure environmental justice, livable communities, equal access, and economic opportunity for everyone.

The transportation bill must substantially expand funding for transit and job access programs. Research shows that minorities rely heavily on public transportation to get to work and participate in their communities. According to data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 12 percent of African American workers, 10 percent of Asian American workers, and 9 percent of Hispanic workers use public transportation to commute to work, compared to a national average of five percent. In urban areas, African Americans and Latinos together comprise 54 percent of transit users. The fare increases implemented in the last 18 months by 50 percent of transit agencies and service cuts implemented by more than 30 percent of transit agencies have fallen disproportionately hard on minority riders.

The transportation bill must increase funding for related air quality programs and strengthen, not rollback clean air and public health protections. Higher percentages of minorities – 80 percent of Latinos and 65 percent of African Americans – live in areas with poor air quality, leading to higher rates of respiratory disease, such as asthma. The American Lung Association reports that asthma prevalence in Blacks is almost twice as high as whites, with mainland Puerto Ricans having a childhood asthma three times as high compared with non-Hispanic white children. Motor vehicles account for a third to half of the health-threatening pollution in most areas failing to meet federal air pollution health standards. Studies show that those living close to high volume highways suffer much higher cancer risk than those living farther away.

The transportation bill must increase funding set aside for pedestrian safety. Data from the 2000 Census reveals that 4 percent of Latinos and Asian Americans, and more than 3 percent of African Americans walk to work, compared to 2.6 percent of whites, making minorities more vulnerable to vehicle-pedestrian accidents. An Atlanta-based study found that minorities had a significantly higher pedestrian fatality rate – 9.74 deaths per 100,000 African Americans, 3.85 deaths per 100,000 Latinos compared to 1.64 deaths per 100,000 whites.


The transportation bill must increase funding set aside for vehicular safety efforts. According to data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for young African American males through the age of 14 and the second leading cause of death for young black males ages 15 to 24.

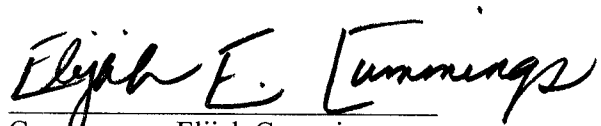
The transportation bill must promote equitable community development. Investing in transportation and transportation enhancement projects is a meaningful strategy for the economic and professional advancement of minorities and the development of their communities. Transit in particular can promote economic growth by providing families with more affordable transportation choices that may allow households to spend less on transportation and more on home ownership. In addition, highway and transit-related construction and maintenance create tens of thousands of living-wage jobs each year and attracts businesses and industries to communities. Rail transit is often credited with rejuvenating cities and neighborhoods, leading countless metropolitan areas to look toward multi-modal transit systems to ease congestion, reduce air pollution, and attract economic development. Lastly, transportation enhancement projects promote alternative forms of transportation, such as walking and biking, as well as community well-being and safety.

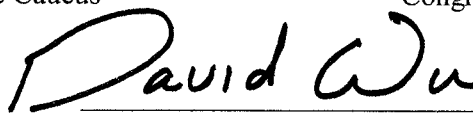
The transportation bill must do more to clarify how local communities may best follow the intent of federal civil rights laws. Clarification is needed on compliance within the Americans with Disabilities Act, Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, and other federal laws and guidance. These laws were designed to protect communities and individuals from a disproportionate level of hardship, including displacement, disruption, and discrimination. One strategy for facilitating better enforcement and to improve knowledge with respect to the impact of transportation planning on low-income and minority communities is to improve the collection and dissemination of data. Data that is more consistent and available in a usable format, including the use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS) technologies, would go a long way in helping transportation decision-makers, other public agencies, and community stakeholders deliver more coordinated transit services.

Together these policy priorities represent an opportunity agenda for all Americans, and will give local communities the tools needed to create environmentally just, livable communities.

Sincerely,

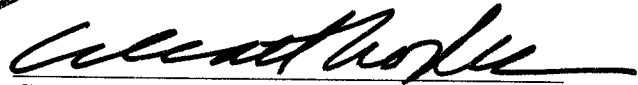

Congressman Ciro D. Rodriguez
Chair
Congressional Hispanic Caucus


Congressman Elijah Cummings
Chair
Congressional Black Caucus

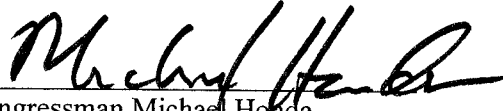

Congressman David Wu
Chair
Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus



Congressman Aníbal Acevedo Vilá
CHC Livable Communities Chair



Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes-Norton
Congressional Black Caucus



Congressman Michael Honda
Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus

c: Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, House Democratic Leader