

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLELAND
CONFIRMATION HEARING FOR TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY-DESIGNATE
MINETA

January 24, 2001

Mr. Secretary-designate, this is your third nomination hearing before the Commerce Committee in less than a year. The last two times you were approved with flying colors, and I have no doubt that you will get equally high marks this third time around. You certainly have my strong support and admiration.

As Secretary of Transportation, you will preside over a department which will face monumental challenges on the ground, air and sea. In the National Civil Aviation Review Commission's landmark report, you said and I quote: "Given the delay and congestion problems that already exist, anticipated growth, without needed expansion of capacity in the air and on the ground, will simply reach a point at which it cannot be accommodated." That was in 1997, and many will contend we have already reached the choke point. With 600,000 passengers a year, with only 5 new runways in the last 9 years, our aviation system is fast approaching gridlock.

In my state of Georgia, Hartsfield is pushing the envelope as the busiest airport in the world. With 78 million passengers a year, it is also the nation's most delay-impacted airport. In 2005, with 100 million passengers projected, and with only the current four runways, each flight at Hartsfield is projected to average 14 minutes of delay. This delay can be cut dramatically--to just five minutes--if Hartsfield gets a desperately needed fifth runway. This is a dramatic savings in time and dollars which will benefit passengers not just in Georgia and the southeast, but passengers throughout the country.

Our gridlock in the skies is mirrored in countless highways across this nation. The Department of Transportation recently projected that traffic congestion in America will increase 400 percent on our urban freeways and more than 200 percent on other U.S. roads in just the next two decades. Metro Atlanta has become a poster child for urban sprawl and congestion. It is the most traffic congested city in the South, and its motorists drive more miles per day than drivers from any other metropolitan area in the country. Fortunately, Georgia is beginning to chart a new course. The State stands ready to flex hundreds of millions of dollars from highway projects to transit projects. Georgia's transportation planners are considering the potential of intercity bullet trains, of light rail, and commuter rail lines serving downtown Atlanta from corridors extending to Athens, Griffin and other key points in the State.

Given the fact that two railroad tracks will carry 20 lanes of highway in rush hour, we may be looking at a potential rebirth of rail, not just in Georgia, but nationwide. How much we can tap this transportation option will depend on the policies and resources emanating from the Department of Transportation.

We all know that there are more questions than answers to our nation's transportation challenges, and the solutions will not be easy and they will not come quick. But I am looking forward to hearing how you plan to address America's 21st Century transportation needs, and in what direction you will lead.