

STATEMENT OF SENATOR CLELAND
COMMERCE COMMITTEE FIELD HEARING IN ATLANTA, GEORGIA
ON TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS FOR GEORGIA

December 6, 2000

Welcome to today's Commerce Committee field hearing on transportation challenges in Georgia. Gathered in this one room we have some of the brightest and best transportation minds in America! Today we will focus on Georgia's commuter congestion--a dilemma mirrored in countless highways across this nation--and on creative solutions to one of the 21st century's most challenging and frustrating problems--gridlock.

We're fortunate to have with us the head of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Secretary Slater, your department has given us a very sobering statistic. According to the U.S. DOT, traffic congestion in America will increase 400 percent on our urban freeways and more than 200 percent on other roads in just the next two decades. Ask anyone from Atlanta, and they will swear to you that the lion's share of that congestion is bound to be right here in our own backyard. Just consider: Metro Atlanta is the most traffic congested city in the South, and Atlanta motorists drive more miles per day than drivers from any other metropolitan area. Total the number of miles Atlantans drive in a single day, and they would stretch from the earth to the sun!

Our traffic-clogged roads have taken a toll on our environment. Due in large part to the exhaust from nearly three million vehicles, Atlanta's skies are in violation of national clean air standards. The boom fell in 1998, when the region lost Federal funds for new road projects and became the nation's poster child for urban sprawl. Now other Georgia cities are in danger of following in Atlanta's footsteps.

But as the song goes, "the times they are a-changing." This past summer the Federal Government approved a transportation plan submitted by the Atlanta region which for the first time ever devotes half its funds to transit. The State stands ready to flex hundreds of millions of dollars from highway projects to transit projects. Georgians are looking at the future possibility of constructing a magnetic levitation high speed train system from Atlanta to Chattanooga. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority is expected to launch a system of express bus services operating along HOV lanes. Georgia 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, Bremen, Griffin and Senoia. Given the fact that two railroad tracks will carry 20 lanes of highway in rush hour traffic, it is little wonder that there is a potential rebirth of rail in Georgia!

These are some of the transportation options we will be examining today. We all know these transportation challenges will not be easy and they will not be quick. And we all know these options come with questions. Will drivers leave their cars for trains? Will trains reduce commuter traffic time? Will rail ridership justify costs? How are communities reacting to the possibility of rail expansion? What federal assistance is out there to help us? Is there sufficient local commitment to meet federal match requirements?

We truly have a blue-ribbon panel today--head of the U.S. Department of Transportation, head of the Federal Railroad Administration, the president of Amtrak, Governor Barnes, Mayor Campbell, Mayor Ellis, Chair of the Barrow County Board of Commissioners, Vice Chair of the Georgia Rail Passenger Program Management Team, representatives from both CSX and Norfolk Southern, and the point person who engineered the successful State of Virginia-Virginia Rail Express partnership. I look forward to hearing answers from you all on how we can address Georgia's 21st Century transportation needs.