

**STATEMENT OF THE  
HONORABLE RODNEY E. SLATER  
BEFORE THE SENATE COMMERCE, SCIENCE, AND  
TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE  
FIELD HEARING CONCERNING THE POTENTIAL FOR  
RAIL TO IMPROVE TRANSPORTATION IN THE  
SOUTHEAST  
ATLANTA, GEORGIA  
DECEMBER 6, 2000**

Senator Cleland, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the potential for rail to improve transportation in the Southeast, specifically in Georgia. High-speed rail corridors, transit, commuter and intercity passenger rail, as well as intercity and express bus service, and intelligent transportation systems offer great promise for addressing the transportation challenges in metropolitan Atlanta. The Atlanta region is well positioned to showcase the positive effects of transportation on mobility and the environment and to show what is possible with an integrated approach to transportation planning and strong financial commitments at the local, state and federal level.

Atlanta is facing some particularly daunting challenges. The metropolitan Atlanta region, which is growing very rapidly, already has a high dependence on the automobile and the highest vehicle mileage per capita in the Nation. It has undertaken major air quality planning to meet the requirements of the Clean Air Act. And, it has developed a transportation plan that helps the region meet its mobility and clean air goals.

Another challenge facing Atlanta is the transportation concerns of civil rights, environmental justice, and low-income groups. Many minority and low-income residents do not own cars. In response to their concerns, the U.S. Department of Transportation, with the Georgia Department of Transportation (GADOT), the Atlanta Regional Commission (ARC) and a coalition of environmental justice and community groups are conducting an assessment of environmental justice issues relating to Atlanta's transportation planning process. We anticipate that this process will help regional transportation planners adjust their strategies to meet transportation needs more equitably, and also serve as model for other metropolitan areas around the country.

State and local leaders are to be commended for their efforts to get critical elements in place. The Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA), created in 1999, has broad powers to manage transportation and air quality projects and land use in nonattainment areas. And, most important, it has the support of the public and private sectors, including the business community. ARC and GRTA are committed to "smart growth" and are looking at ways to

encourage local governments to work toward development that supports that objective. Steps are being taken to assure that all communities in the Atlanta region are involved in the transportation planning process.

Providing a broad range of transportation options and choices is an essential component of livability and “smart growth.” I understand that Georgia has taken good advantage of the flexible provisions of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21) by directing close to 55 percent of the transportation funds for Atlanta for transit purposes. The recently adopted transportation plan for the Atlanta metropolitan area emphasizes both transit and commuter rail as a part of the metropolitan transportation system. Encouraging land use that supports and sustains transit is a key feature of the metropolitan plan. Such linkages are essential to the long-term effectiveness of transit and to achieving a balanced surface transportation system.

Across the Nation, communities have demonstrated a strong interest in pursuing “smart growth” -- an approach that ensures a high quality of life and strong, sustainable economic growth. The Department has strengthened its role as a partner with states and local communities by providing the tools and resources, in concert with our partners, to preserve green space, ease traffic congestion, and pursue regional “smart growth” strategies. We are showing that collaboration works.

Partnerships are emerging across sectors, as businesses, state and local governments, environmentalists, community groups and others recognize the common ground they share. These regional approaches produce benefits for all.

Atlanta is one of the four cities nationwide in the Clinton-Gore Administration’s new program, The Partnership for Regional Livability (PRL). One of the primary goals of this program is to identify a role for the federal government in support of regional initiatives. Mayor Campbell and Governor Barnes, both of whom are here today, have been strong supporters and catalysts for the Chattahoochee Riverway Project. That project is part of a broader state and regional initiative to support livable communities and combat sprawl throughout northwest Georgia. This is just one example of what can be accomplished when partners work together.

Georgia has been a leader in forging partnerships at the state and local levels. The partnership of the Georgia Department of Transportation, GRTA, and the Georgia Rail Passenger Authority (GRPA) is a case in point. These three bodies want to revive rail passenger service in Georgia with links serving the Macon-Atlanta corridor and the Athens-Atlanta corridor. They are looking at other options as well, including bus service in these corridors. You’ll be hearing more about these from other witnesses today. This is part of a vision for better passenger service throughout the Southeast.

Under the Clinton-Gore Administration, a record amount of money has been available for transportation – including \$58.8 billion for fiscal year 2001, of which \$43 billion is for transportation infrastructure, more than double the average amount provided in fiscal years 1990-1993. TEA-21 not only provided more funding than we have ever had before, it provided unprecedented flexibility to use the funds for a wide range of transportation solutions. The Department's surface transportation programs include formula and discretionary grants as well as programs that provide direct loans, loan guarantees and lines of credit. These varied and unique approaches to funding give communities a broad range of incentives to expand transportation choices. As I noted at the outset, Georgia has capitalized on this flexibility.

TEA-21 programs supporting high-speed rail include the Next Generation High Speed Rail Technology program, that develops technology to improve the effectiveness of high-speed rail in partnership with states and industry, and the Grade Crossing Hazard Elimination Program that includes support for states with designated high-speed rail corridors. In addition, TEA-21's Maglev Deployment Program is assisting state planning for seven maglev projects including the one proposed here in Atlanta that would provide for the first 31 miles of a 110-mile maglev project linking Atlanta Hartsfield Airport to Atlanta and Chattanooga's Lovell Airfield along Interstate Highway Route I-75. The legislation specifies that one project will be selected for federal funding and construction, subject to the appropriation of funds. The Department has cooperated with Amtrak and the states to implement Amtrak's Acela Express high-speed rail in the Northeast Corridor and to plan for high-speed rail service in ten other corridors, including a new route between Birmingham, Alabama and Atlanta, Georgia and a new route from Atlanta and Macon to Savannah, Georgia and Jacksonville, Florida.

TEA-21 authorized two innovative financing programs for major transportation projects. The Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act (TIFIA) program provides loans, loan guarantees, and lines of credit to fund major transportation investments of critical national importance. The Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing (RRIF) Program provides direct loans and loan guarantees for terms up to 25 years to acquire, improve, or rehabilitate intermodal or rail equipment and facilities. There is a statutory maximum of \$3.5 billion in principal. A unique feature of the RRIF Program is the use of a Credit Risk Premium instead of appropriated funds. The premium is a cash payment provided by a non-federal entity to cover the estimated long-term cost to the Federal Government of a loan or loan guarantee.

High-speed rail offers an attractive transportation alternative to congested highways and airports in certain intercity corridors, such as the corridors under study in Georgia and between Atlanta and other southeast cities. The Clinton-Gore Administration has supported increased funding for Amtrak, both through capital budgets and our proposed Expanded Passenger Rail Fund. The Administration also strongly supports enactment of the proposed High Speed Rail

Investment Act currently under consideration by Congress. It would provide up to \$10 billion in funding over a ten-year period for capital investment in high-speed rail, which could include the Atlanta high-speed rail corridor. States would be required to put up a match of at least 20 percent. The additional funding provided could reduce traffic congestion and air pollution, enhance smart growth, protect open space and contribute to the economic development of communities served by passenger rail. We hope that Congress will pass this important legislation before the end of the current session.

Primary federal funding sources for transit projects include the Federal Transit Administration's Formula Grants program and Capital Investment Grants program. The Formula program may be used for either operating or capital costs, including bus and rail vehicle replacements. The Capital Investment program provides funding for new and extended fixed guideway systems, fixed guideway modernization, and bus and bus related facilities.

Many transit projects also are eligible for the surface transportation flexible funding programs including the Surface Transportation Program (STP) and the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program (CMAQ), and also, in some circumstances, the National Highway System (NHS) program. CMAQ, for example, can help communities create high occupancy vehicle lanes, provide incentives for ridesharing, improve transit facilities, and select from a number of other options for more livable transportation systems. Georgia has made great strides, but as with any state, it must continue to look closely at its own sources of funding, both at the state level and locally, as all of these federal programs require a significant local commitment of funds.

We recognize that the Atlanta area is making real progress in addressing its transportation and environmental challenges while continuing to support a growing economy. Transit and rail clearly are a major part of the picture, along with highways. No one approach can meet the varied and complex transportation needs and environmental demands. We look forward to continuing to work with Georgia's state and local officials and other interested parties as they work toward a viable solution for the Atlanta region, a solution that includes a strong financial commitment by them. With a strong local commitment and continued creative leadership, Atlanta is becoming a showcase for the Nation.

This concludes my prepared statement, Senator Cleland, and I would be happy to answer any questions you might have.

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