

Testimony for U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation Subcommittee on Science and Space

"Connecting America: Improving Access to Infrastructure for Communities Across the Country"

Good morning! I would like to thank Senator Thune, Senator Nelson and the entire committee for extending this invitation to testify before you today. I am Philip Levine, Mayor of the City of Miami Beach and I would like to share my unique experience and my knowledge, on behalf of our city, where I have had the privilege to serve as mayor for the past two terms. Miami Beach is truly one of the most diverse cities in the country, one of the top destinations for tourists and a key link between North and South America. For over 40 years, I have proudly called Florida my home, having built a number of successful businesses in my community as an entrepreneur.

In my tenure as mayor, I believe that are three topics that are crucially important to improving local infrastructure, not just for Miami Beach and for Florida, but for communities across America.

Firstly, local communities face a challenge of resiliency: how can we build infrastructure that can last for future generations?

In Florida, our nation's third largest state, resiliency is a major issue. Along our shoreline, climate change is not just a talking point, but an immediate threat to communities up and down the coast. This is doubly true in South Florida, where the porous limestone base and low topography make our communities especially vulnerable to sea level rise.

Before I took office, Miami Beach streets were frequently flooded on sunny days, with saltwater surging out of city drains due to king tides and elevated groundwater levels. Until recently, it was common to see residents sandbagging their local businesses, or taking off their shoes to wade through knee-high water to access their homes or places of work.

With requests for federal and state assistance frozen in permanent gridlock, we took bold, innovative and immediate measures to protect the city and build resilience, using local funds to physically raise roads, install storm pumps, and build higher sea walls to keep our streets dry from both rain and tidal waters. The climate change crisis required immediate action and swift investments in our community, which prevented us from going through the often-slowed federal process.

A second challenge our local communities face is connectivity. The more connected we can make our major metropolitan areas, the better we are able to unlock our state's potential and attract more visitors and businesses. Plans to better connect Miami and Miami Beach, where over 300,000 vehicles go back and forth per day, have been in the works for decades. It was only recently that we have made some progress with a public transit option connecting mainland Miami and Miami Beach, through the SMART plan, and not without a fight and it is still many years in the future.

Currently in Florida, we are finishing construction on a high-speed rail system, the Brightline, which will connect Miami-Dade with the metropolitan area of Orlando. Soon, Miami residents and visitors will be able to easily take a trip up to Disney World, while Orlando residents and visitors can travel down to our beautiful beaches. I believe these efforts are a great beginning and will be a boon for our state and local economies.

However, whether in building resilience or creating connectivity between our cities, local governments can't do it alone. In Miami Beach, for instance, we need our federal government to be committed partners in protecting the assets and private property of our residents and businesses. By the year 2050, 25% of our streets will be below the projected high tides. We have defined about \$500 million of drainage improvements necessary to address flooding, but we still stand \$300 million short to complete these upgrades. In the next 50 years, the US Army Corps of Engineers estimates that Miami-Dade County will need over 23 million cubic yards of sand. Our beaches are a major economic engine in Florida, and annually draw tens of millions of tourists from around the world. There is no question that ignoring these challenges will only leave our community with losses, leaving residents and businesses with the suffering.

This leads me to my final and most significant point—we desperately need a renewed commitment between the federal government and local governments. The future of Florida’s resiliency and transportation will not be determined only through local funding and efforts, but through a partnership between our cities and the federal government in Washington D.C. It’s time that the federal government appreciates that *Connecting Cities* is the future that will define the success stories so many Americans are craving.

A common refrain I hear from mayors in Florida, and around the country, is that the current federal process, when it comes to urgent and ambitious infrastructure projects, is broken and frustrating. We are unable to get the help that we need from the federal government, because the levels of analysis paralysis often slow down the opportunity for progress.

So where do we go from here? How can we advance bold, innovative long-stalled projects at the state level? The answer comes down to a real emphasis on *Connecting Cities*. We need the federal government to connect directly with municipalities and empower local government to move projects through the federal government with speed and determination. We need to accelerate the review process, expedite funding mechanisms and collaborate on the permitting requirements.

I understand there is, and will continue to be a debate whether projects should be funded through public or private investment. However, I think if you asked mayors around the country, they would say that solutions should drive the discussion and getting to YES on infrastructure investments must be the guiding voice. Bridges, tunnels, and airports are not Republican or Democrat. When your constituents are stuck in traffic for hours, at the end of a long work day, on a clogged causeway, they are not asking themselves if that new bridge, tunnel, or transit system is going to be funded through federal, state or private funds. They just want an easier commute so they can get home to see their families.

This June, Miami Beach will be hosting the U.S. Conference of Mayors. Mayors from across the country, both Republican and Democrat, will gather to work to

solve the pressing issues of our communities. We have extended an invitation to President Donald Trump and Vice President Mike Pence, to speak and listen to the Mayors, to learn about what frustrates us and what can be done together to fix our cities, and to hear their plans to rebuild our nation's infrastructure post-haste.

One of my favorite proverbs, which I often quote, comes from Ancient Greece. The Greeks claimed that a society can only grow great when it plants trees whose shade they may never see. In our cities today, not only are we unable to plant the trees, but due to excessive regulation and bureaucracy, we can't even dig the holes to place the seeds.

Infrastructure is the backbone of our local and national economy—it determines where companies locate and where jobs are created. In the recent infrastructure plan submitted by Senator Nelson and Senate Democrats, their plan would create over 15 million new jobs around our country. I would implore the committee that if we are to build better infrastructure in states like Florida, we must find ways to fix the process so that we can build a brighter, more interconnected and more sustainable future. Let's have our federal government truly connect cities in the 21st Century!

Thank you for your time.