

INTRODUCTION

Thank you Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, Members of the Committee for allowing me to share a local perspective on rebuilding America's infrastructure. Any mayor of any of the thousands of towns and cities across the United States could speak to the challenges local elected officials face when attempting to plan, finance and oversee infrastructure investments.

I believe every mayor wants similar things for his or her town. We want a good quality of life for our residents. We want safe communities. We want opportunities for economic growth. We want to provide solutions when our constituents have complaints. Quality infrastructure is both the bedrock and the catalyst for making these things happen.

THE HATTIESBURG STORY

Hattiesburg is a city of around 50,000 residents in South Mississippi, about an hour north of the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Home to both The University of Southern Mississippi and William

Carey University, as well as two major medical facilities and Camp Shelby, around 150,000 work in and around Hattiesburg on a daily basis. In its early days, it earned the nickname “the Hub” because of its central location to other regional commercial centers such as New Orleans, Mobile, Gulfport, Jackson and Meridian. As with many towns in that era, it was the railroad that brought economic growth, both in goods and in people.

In our case, those rail lines continue today, serving the freight needs of our industrial park and the many rail lines that intersect in and around Hattiesburg. Additionally, those rail lines serve passenger rail, as Hattiesburg is Mississippi’s third most visited city and a beneficiary of being on Amtrak’s Crescent Line.

We have been very fortunate to have been at or near the top of job growth in Mississippi for several years in a row. Even in the pandemic, we have held strong. In fact, *Wall Street 24/7* reported that out of all the metropolitan statistical areas in the country, Hattiesburg was #2 in job growth nationwide between February and November of last year.

Freight is a valued component in that growth. However, a challenge that developed over the course of the 135-plus years of our city's existence is that when a city has a rail switchyard in the middle of its downtown – and 20 at-grade crossings in and around that downtown and no grade separated crossings – problems will occur. Blocked crossings are a part of daily life in Downtown Hattiesburg. Aside from being a source of frustration for motorists, they are also a safety concern and have been the site of recent fatalities. It has been a generations-old problem for Hattiesburg. The solution, of course, was simple. We needed an overpass. Actually, we needed two or three overpasses. However, overpasses cost a great deal of money – money that a city like Hattiesburg would not simply have at its disposal.

Fortunately, we found federal avenues to leverage our limited local capacity into funding that could build those overpasses. In early 2020, we were awarded a CRISI grant – Consolidated Rail Infrastructure and Safety Improvements Program – that matched local support to build the first overpass on a road just south of our

downtown. We were lucky a second time in 2020, as we were awarded a BUILD grant to build a second overpass along that same road, south of our downtown. Our Congressional delegation, particularly Senator Wicker, were incredibly helpful in this effort. We also had the support and collaboration of both freight railroads on our CRISI and BUILD applications.

By the time both of these overpasses are built, there will be one road – with one grade separated crossing on each end – that motorists, cyclists and pedestrians can take when trains are across the tracks.

If federal surface transportation grants were not available, these projects would not happen for Hattiesburg. Most cities and towns cannot - on their own - solve these longstanding challenges without state, but more often, federal support.

THE PROBLEM FACING EVERY COMMUNITY

Cities and counties have a tough enough time meeting their existing infrastructure maintenance issues. There are roads that

need paving. There are bridges that need replacing. There are water lines that are undersized or aging. There are sanitary sewer issues that lead to consent decrees, putting another external pressure on a municipality. There is a need for more storm water capacity. There is public demand for sidewalks and ADA accessibility.

However, there is very little extra revenue available – after taking care of all those other things, if you can take care of them – to either solve a longstanding challenge; or to invest in game-changing projects that can set the stage for potential growth areas. Surface transportation grants are a lifeline that cities and counties can use, and it is critical that Congress reauthorize those programs. Furthermore, when weighing such reauthorization, there are a few items I believe policymakers may want to consider.

#1 - LOCAL GOVERNMENTS SHOULD PARTICIPATE IN FUNDING INFRASTRUCTURE

First, even with reauthorization, I believe the local community needs to have skin in the game. No community should expect the

federal government or state government to shoulder the full responsibility of infrastructure at the local level. Proper planning and prioritized budgeting are responsibilities of local leaders. In our case, we were paying off some general obligation debt and used that existing debt service capacity in our millage to issue new bonds that will match the federal investment on both of these grants.

#2 - ADDITIONAL INVESTMENT NEEDED

Secondly, I would encourage more investment in these programs. We went after an INFRA grant once and BUILD grants twice before finding success in 2020. I know there are other communities with strong projects that could win awards if the available pool of funding had the certainty and funding provided in a long-term surface transportation reauthorization. Our grade crossing projects were one longtime transportation challenge. However, there are a dozen other projects on my desk now waiting for funding so we

can solve those problems and capitalize on opportunities for economic growth.

#3 - THE NEED FOR PLANNING FUNDS AND TECHNICAL SUPPORT

Third, communities need technical support and assistance with planning when trying to access these programs. We had a local firm that assisted in writing our grant and doing the benefit-cost analysis; and an engineering firm that helped with plans on where the overpasses should go, as well as cost estimates on the project. The city incurred costs for those services, and we were more than willing to pay them in order to apply for CRISI and BUILD.

However, some communities might be weighing projects that require more outside expertise – and thus, more expense – when it comes to even proposing a solution to a transportation challenge.

Having funds available for planning costs would help, and it would also allow for DOT to gain understanding on a community's unique challenges prior to the grant application going in.

I would also encourage DOT to continue providing technical support. Having this dialogue helped us improve our application with each application round, and I know many cities and counties could benefit from this outreach.

#4 - NEED FOR DIRECT ASSISTANCE TO CITIES, COUNTIES AND MPOs ON COMPLETE STREET INFRASTRUCTURE

Fourth, any 21st-century transportation system must accommodate the needs of all users, whether in a vehicle, on a train, in a wheelchair, on bike or on foot. Modern cities are expected to build out complete streets. Our residents demand it. However, other than TAP, FTA's 5339 grant program or including complete street style elements in large projects such as BUILD, the direct resources available to cities, counties and MPOs are limited.

#5 - REAUTHORIZATION IN LIGHT OF POTENTIAL OMB's CHANGE TO MSA DEFINITION

Finally, if and when these programs are renewed, it is important they remain accessible to communities of all size. Right now, there is a proposal before the Office of Management and Budget that would double the minimum population requirement – from 50,000 to 100,000 – for a community to be considered a metropolitan statistical area. This would adversely affect Hattiesburg and 143 other cities around the country, and the implications of changing this definition could be profound on grants and other federal programs, particularly in the transportation space. If this metric is changed – and we certainly hope it is not – it is critical that any legislation that reauthorizes these grant programs not be tied to the definition of an MSA.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the U.S. Department of Transportation's discretionary grant programs are vital toward the aspirations of every city around the country. As mayors, we have a responsibility for maintaining what's here now. But if we stop there, we are

choosing to settle for status quo. As we look to where we want each of our individual communities to go – in economic development, in education, in tourism and in quality of life – I have to believe shared infrastructure investment between federal, state and local governments can build strong, visionary cities – which in turn will be cornerstones of an even stronger nation.