

Testimony of Jonathan Morrison
Nominee for Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
Before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
July 16, 2025

Good morning, Chairman Cruz, Ranking Member Cantwell, and distinguished Members of the Committee:

It is a distinct honor to appear before you today as the nominee for Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). I am deeply grateful for the trust President Trump and Secretary Duffy placed in me with this nomination.

I want to recognize my parents Norene and Charlie, who are watching this morning from the town of Cool, CA. I would also like to thank my family, friends, colleagues, and mentors for their support and guidance over the years. Most importantly, however, I want to recognize my wife Fernanda Morrison, who is here with me today. She has been my constant foundation, inspiration, and motivator, and I would like to thank her for her support and sacrifice.

I have spent my entire career in the automotive and technology fields. After being the first from my family to graduate from college, and then law school, I started my career at the California New Car Dealers Association, where I worked on legal and policy issues affecting the automotive industry. I later led an automotive compliance consulting company that worked directly with industry clients to implement regulatory requirements. I was then appointed as Chief Counsel to the agency I'm now nominated to lead, where I worked shoulder to shoulder with NHTSA's fantastic team of highway safety attorneys, engineers, economists, and other researchers and professionals. After President Trump's first term, I was hired by Apple, where I worked closely with leadership and a host of amazing engineers and designers on a range of issues, including working through regulatory implications of cutting-edge technologies. I humbly believe that the culmination of my experiences qualifies me to be NHTSA's next Administrator.

Why am I passionate about this role? I believe the motor vehicle has been instrumental to the success of the American public over the past century. Ready access to a car or truck greatly expands our personal, professional, and recreational horizons well beyond any other transportation technology, and has much to do with the ability to achieve the American Dream through upward economic mobility.

But our nation's relationship with the automobile is facing several critical challenges, as is the automotive industry itself. I'd briefly like to mention three.

First, this personal mobility comes at a great cost. Each year, we see approximately six million crashes, millions of injuries, and tens of thousands of fatalities. And with the pandemic, our nation saw an increase from 2019's 36,000 crash fatalities—already unacceptably high—to over 43,000 fatalities in 2021. While fatalities have trickled downward since, we are still several thousand higher than just before the pandemic. Each number represents a parent, child, sibling, spouse, or friend. Everybody in this room has likely been affected by a crash where somebody has been seriously injured or killed.

Despite this, every year 50% of those killed in crashes chose not to wear a seatbelt, a third involved a driver who chose to use drugs or have that extra drink or two and drive impaired, 30% involved a driver who chose to speed, reducing reaction times and massively increasing crash forces, and far too many involved drivers who chose to drive distracted. Since the vast majority of crashes is driven by human choice or error, we need to double down on successful countermeasures to driver behavioral risks. That starts with reinvigorating the agency's partnership with States and law enforcement to emphasize the critical importance of traffic enforcement action and removing unsafe drivers from the road.

Second, today's vehicles are safer than ever, but not enough people are buying them, resulting in the oldest fleet in US history—averaging nearly 13 years. Not coincidentally, today's vehicles are far more expensive than ever. Ensuring a supply of affordable vehicles that meet consumer needs and wants is critical to addressing our safety crisis. NHTSA can support this by ensuring our regulations meet the need for motor vehicle safety without imposing undue costs or design restrictions that hamper innovation. This means identifying unintended barriers to innovation and pursuing robust yet design-neutral performance standards.

Third, providing room for continued safety innovation is a hallmark of the Vehicle Safety Act and is critical to enabling safety improvements in the fleet of tomorrow. Technologies such as software-defined vehicles, zonal architectures, alternative powertrains, and especially automated vehicles (AVs), offer potential benefits in terms of safety and efficiency, but are complex and introduce risks unique to each application. NHTSA cannot sit back and wait for problems to arise with such developing technologies, but must demonstrate strong leadership. For AVs, this means deep and sustained engagement with industry, State and local governments, and technical safety experts. It also means the creation of a Safety Framework consisting of guidance and, yes, regulation. Realization of the mobility and safety benefits from AVs depends entirely upon consumer trust, which must be rooted in safety. The technical and policy challenges surrounding these new technologies must be addressed. Failure to do so will result in products that the public will not accept and the agency will not tolerate.

I look forward to today's hearing and hope to earn your support.