

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

January 24, 2020

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

We write to encourage your full consideration of the rural infrastructure priorities that we have heard from our constituents as part of the Department of Transportation's (DOT) Rural Opportunities to Use Transportation for Economic Success (ROUTES) initiative.

Transportation infrastructure is critical to economic development in rural areas in our state. Rural counties often have limited funds for the development and maintenance of roads, bridges, and other important infrastructure needs. Many of these same counties have been impacted by recent uncertainty in the farm economy. As you evaluate rural transportation needs across the country, we respectfully request that you keep these concerns in mind and consider the following transportation needs in rural Minnesota:

Federal grant assistance. While grant programs administered by DOT provide critical funding for transportation projects in Minnesota, many rural communities do not have the resources to meet the initial regulatory requirements required to apply for grants and may not be able to provide the necessary matching funds. The Minnesota Department of Transportation will benefit from additional resources that allow it to improve community outreach and help local officials meet initial regulatory requirements. Rural communities will also benefit from federal support to help them identify and apply for grant funding of eligible projects.

Broadband connectivity. Access to broadband in rural areas is a core economic issue. According to the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development, more than 16 percent of rural Minnesotans lack access to high-speed internet.¹ DOT plays a critical role in improving broadband access by requiring coordination between states and federal agencies when highway projects are built so that broadband infrastructure is installed at the same time. These policies help streamline broadband deployment and reduce the costs of building new broadband infrastructure while helping expand wireless coverage in rural areas.

Tribal transportation infrastructure. Minnesota would benefit from increased federal investment in transportation infrastructure on tribal lands. In our state, some tribal nations take on the construction and improvement of roads, bridges, and other infrastructure, many of which

¹ 2019 *Broadband Availability in the State of Minnesota*. Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development. Retrieved from https://mn.gov/deed/assets/township-wireline_tcm1045-297678.pdf

are unpaved and underdeveloped, for the benefit of both Native and non-Native communities.² Roads managed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) around the country are also in dire need of federal funding for safety improvements and maintenance. Strong federal funding for the Department of Transportation's Tribal Transportation Program, Tribal Technical Assistance Program, Tribal Transit Program, and BIA Road Maintenance Program will help meet these needs.

Freight movement. Rural communities in Minnesota would benefit from improving the safety of freight movement. These include safety improvements such as widening road shoulders and improving visibility and lighting, as well as strengthening local bridges and increasing road capacity for trucks and cargo vehicles. An effective and safe freight system is vital to ensuring that Minnesota producers and businesses can access local and national markets.

Non-motorized mobility. Rural communities in Minnesota would also benefit from infrastructure projects that improve non-motorized mobility. According to the Minnesota Department of Transportation, about 70 percent of rural transit users in Minnesota do not have access to a car or a driver's license.³ These residents rely on public transportation, bicycle lanes, or pedestrian walkways for mobility. Rural infrastructure initiatives should take into account the reality of shared use paths and roads, and the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists in rural areas with fewer transit options.

Thank you for your consideration of this request.

Sincerely,


Amy Klobuchar
United States Senator


Tina Smith
United States Senator

² *Fiscal Year 2020 Department of Transportation Budget Request*. National Congress of American Indians. Retrieved from http://www.ncai.org/16_NCAI-FY20-Transportation.pdf

³ *Minnesota Department of Transportation Greater Minnesota Transit Investment Plan 2010 On-Board Survey Tech Memo*. (2010, August 25). Retrieved from <http://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/reports/investmentplan/pdf/SurveyReport.pdf>