

Keynote Address by Secretary Ray LaHood

At a time in our history when many Americans are skeptical about the ability of their government to get things done, it is truly an honor to celebrate one of the most accomplished Congressional committees in our history.

The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has a long and proud legacy in this country, and I am honored to have taken part in it. For more than 200 years, this Committee, in various forms, has given shape and scope to our shared vision of a nation that is interested equally in economic power and individual liberty. Neither goal is possible without an infrastructure that maximizes freedom of movement – for people and their goods – while providing safety and reliability. Fortunately, the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has a well-deserved reputation for getting things done.

Just as importantly, this Committee's actions over the years have played an essential role in enabling us to enjoy the highest standard of living on earth, and one of the most diverse and extensive transportation systems of any developed nation. Where would we be without the great public works projects of the 19th and 20th centuries that were authorized by this Committee's predecessors – from canals and railroads to highways and airports? The America we know today simply would not exist because that vital infrastructure would not exist. When merchant ships needed a new lighthouse after the Revolutionary War to guide them along the Virginia coastline, this Committee's earliest ancestor made it happen. A century later, when Americans looked west for opportunity and expansion, this Committee built the roads and railways that took them there. Later still, this Committee participated in passing the Federal Highway Act of 1956 – one of the largest public works programs in our history. It also played a vital role in the Clean Water Act of 1965, which began the task of rescuing and restoring our polluted waterways. When tragedy struck on September 11, 2001, the Committee made history once again, by working quickly to shape a new aviation security agency to help make our skies safer. The American public owes an enormous "thank you" to this Committee for having the courage and commitment to move these complex legislative programs forward.

This successful track record has much to teach us about the importance of working in a bipartisan matter on big legislative initiatives that require all of us to look past the next election cycle – and think seriously about doing the right thing for our children and grandchildren. Building and maintaining good, reliable transportation and infrastructure in this country should not be viewed merely through the lens of partisan politics. These are not liberal or conservative priorities. They are American priorities.

When Republican President George W. Bush chose former Democratic Congressman Norm Mineta to lead the U.S. Department of Transportation, the President knew he had chosen a Transportation and Infrastructure Committee member who would look at issues from both sides, in a fair, bipartisan way. This approach was important to me throughout my own Congressional career, on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee as well as Appropriations. I continue to feel that way as a member of President Obama's Cabinet. I'm proud to be part of an Administration that believes it is important to invest in our country's future - and sustain our ability to compete in a global economy.

Times may be tough, but we cannot allow our nation to stand still. While we must take action to bring down the national debt, we must also continue to invest in the public infrastructure that Congress worked so hard to construct over the years. We simply cannot afford to disinvest in the assets so vital to this country's success. The American Recovery and

Reinvestment Act is all about moving us forward, thoughtfully and responsibly. It's about keeping our nation's public works agenda on track - creating good jobs for today while making sound investments that will lead to new opportunities tomorrow. In a very real sense, the Department of Transportation's Recovery Act investments, combined with other priorities, will help ensure that the centuries of work done under this Committee's jurisdiction will be preserved and strengthened.

We're building on your legacy by offering Americans more transportation choices so that we can continue to enhance our mobility, and keep people and commerce flowing freely. For example, we're teaming up with HUD and the EPA to create the federal government's first sustainability partnership. Working together, our departments will coordinate and direct federal investments in transportation, housing, improved air quality, and water infrastructure across the country. This will help to ensure that we build more transit near affordable housing, combat sprawl, and help communities become both more livable and sustainable.

I think that as we come out of this recession, we're going to see that what the American people care about is living in safe, affordable, clean communities where it's easy to get to work, and to access health care and other vital services, with or without a car. That's pretty basic, but it's also very important. That's what we're going to deliver.

I'm confident that the Obama Administration and my Department will work effectively with all of you to develop a new reauthorization package that makes our roads, rails, and transit systems better, more efficient, and safer so we can meet those goals. Under Chairman Oberstar and Congressman Mica's leadership, I know the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee will continue to build on a legacy of achievement for the American people.