Dear SENATOR:

As the next authorization of the national transportation bill approaches, communities large and small are working to ensure that our transportation systems provide access and opportunity for us all, including residents of small cities, towns, rural areas, frontier areas and tribal reservations.

Traditionally, solutions for rural transportation have underinvested in low-cost travel options such as vanpools and inter-city buses. This model is a disservice to the 20% of Americans who live in rural areas who would benefit from greater flexibility in the transportation decision-making process and more options for moving around, notably due to these challenges:

- Greater vulnerability to high gas prices, since driving is often the only option
- 61% of all traffic fatalities occur on rural roads, while only 39% of vehicle miles traveled occur in rural areas and 21% of the U.S. lives here; 8,853 more fatalities occurred in rural areas than metropolitan ones in 2001, an increase from 6,954 in 1990¹
- Greater numbers of seniors, veterans and low-income populations—who are less able to drive—live in rural areas and need more transportation options to access jobs, health care services, shopping and community centers
- Decisions about rural transportation planning are often made by state departments of transportation, instead of local officials, and too often, roads and highways are the only option given to small cities, towns and rural regions
- Forty percent of rural roads are not in good condition² and one in four of the nation’s bridges is structurally deficient or functionally obsolete³

The process to address these challenges begins with empowering non-metropolitan areas and tribes with greater decision-making authority as transportation plans are developed and implemented, which is currently limited. Non-metropolitan and tribal officials should be given a “seat at the table” in our statewide transportation planning process through the creation or authorization of Rural Transportation Planning Organizations (RTPOs), which would increase technical capacity and help ensure that rural voices are heard.

Surveys and studies have shown that public transportation use in small cities and rural areas is in demand. For example, Opportunity Link, through North Central Montana Transit (NCMT), recently brought free, fixed-route bus service linking the communities of Hill and Blaine counties with the Rocky Boy’s and Fort Belknap Indian Reservations. In the first 180 days of operation, about 11,500 passengers were served—more than the population of Havre, MT—even though studies indicated that the system would move a few hundred people per month. For rural areas, transit not only increases access for residents and visitors, it can enhance economic development. This is demonstrated in “Public Transportation on the Move in Rural America” by Dennis M. Brown, Regional Economist for the Economic Research Service at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, who found that for every additional dollar spent on rural transit (usually by a transit agency), rural areas derived about 3.1 dollars in benefits.

³ Data provided by the Federal Highway Administration, U.S. Department of Transportation
As America moves toward a 21st century system that must deal with a growing population and changing demographics, we must increase our investment in flexible and cost-effective public transportation options that can serve small towns and rural areas. While public transit is under the purview of the Banking Committee, the structure of the bill drafted by the Environment and Public Works Committee will help determine whether we can take these steps to improve public transportation.

Rural areas have unique needs that cannot always be met under the current federal program; a variety of transportation options are necessary in order to connect our communities to essential destinations. However, rural communities often struggle with insufficient funding to maintain and improve substandard roads, deteriorating bridges, transit services, and intercity passenger transportation. Changing demographics also bring challenges to many of these areas as higher proportions of older and lower-income citizens live in non-metropolitan areas and have few options for getting around.

We should provide flexibility to help meet these needs while reclaiming the economic vitality and character of our small towns and cities, preserving and protecting farmland, capitalizing on intercity transportation investments, improving transportation safety and public health, and empowering those who live in small communities and rural regions with increased decision-making authority—by allowing communities to consider investments in rail, local street networks, highways or intercity bus—and make sure we are not pre-determining the best solutions for rural communities in Washington, D.C. In addition to the aforementioned policy recommendations, we support the following provisions to benefit rural areas in the next transportation authorization:

- A competitive grant program should be established to allow small cities and towns—in non-metropolitan areas and on tribal reservations—to revitalize their existing town centers, promote economic development and provide a variety of transportation options, including car sharing, accessible walking and biking paths, intercity buses and public transportation.
- States should identify high-risk rural roads, where there are high crash rates per vehicle miles traveled, and prioritize safety improvements there.
- Coordinated human services plans should be strengthened to increase coordination of and flexibility in eligible uses of funds between the 5310, JARC and New Freedom transit programs, which will foster a more efficient use of resources and provide greater opportunities for people with disabilities, older Americans and people with low incomes in rural areas to have access to transportation.
- Car ownership programs for people with low incomes living in areas where public transportation is not possible or economically viable should be supported as an eligible use of JARC funds.
- Federal dollars should continue to be able to pay for maintenance and repair costs of off-system, locally owned roads and bridges, which would maintain current access and save money: every $1 of early maintenance that is postponed leads to repairs that cost $4 to $5 later.4

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- The installation of broadband should be an eligible transportation expense, such as when a highway or bridge is repaired or maintained, since broadband increases access for people living in rural areas.
- Rail corridor, local street network, access management, highway operational, and intercity bus improvements should be eligible for funding under the Surface Transportation Program.
- Programs should be created to prepare and develop a rural workforce among disconnected youth, people with disabilities, local and intercity transit employees, individuals who enter the transit profession, and disadvantaged transit industry individuals, including racial and ethnic minorities underrepresented in transit management.
- Enable intercity bus operators to meet or exceed the access standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). The program to help intercity bus operators meet the mandate of a wheelchair lift on every new bus should be extended, since this assistance is critical to the ability of those operators to maintain and/or expand their rural service.
- A temporary change under SAFETEA-LU should be made permanent to authorize FTA to allow states to include the private investment in existing, unsubsidized bus service as a local match for new, subsidized bus service that connects with and feeds the existing service.

The time has come to ensure that Americans in small cities, towns, rural regions, frontier areas and tribes have increased transportation decision-making authority and a greater ability to choose from a range of transportation options that increase access for our diverse populations, including car sharing, public transportation, intercity bus, rail and walking and biking infrastructure; a greater variety of transportation options will help us get to our jobs and community centers, promote the revitalization of Main Streets, let our children walk and bike safely to and from school and allow people with low incomes, older Americans and individuals with disabilities access to essential destinations. We must hold government accountable for the wise investment of our transportation tax dollars to ensure that we have these transportation options, and therefore urge you to pass a federal transportation authorization bill that includes a rural policy proposal that meets our stated goals.

Sincerely,

American Bus Association (National, Headquarters in Washington, D.C.)
Association of Programs for Rural Independent Living (National, Headquarters in Arkansas)
Center for Rural Strategies (National, Offices in Tennessee and Kentucky)
Environmental Law & Policy Center (Regional, Headquarters in Illinois)
League of Rural Voters (National, Headquarters in Minnesota)
National Congress of American Indians (National, Headquarters in Washington, D.C.)
National Trust for Historic Preservation (National, Headquarters in Washington, D.C.)
Southern Environmental Law Center (Regional, Headquarters in Virginia)
YouthBuild USA (National, Headquarters in Massachusetts)
California WALKS (California)
Catholic Charities, Diocese of Stockton (California)
Central Valley Air Quality Coalition (California)
Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria (California)
Fresno Metro Ministry (California)
Healthy Humboldt Coalition (California)
North Coast Environmental Center (California)
North State Super Region (California)
Redwood Coast Rural Action (California)
Redwood Community Action Agency (California)
WALKSacramento (California)
Watershed Research and Training Center (California)
Idaho Smart Growth (Idaho)
Housing Preservation Project (Minnesota)
Transit for Livable Communities (Minnesota)
Active Transportation Alternatives (Montana)
Area IV Agency on Aging (Montana)
Billings League of Women Voters (Montana)
Career Training Institute (Montana)
Citizens for a Better Flathead (Montana)
Current Transportation Solutions (Montana)
Gallatin Valley Land Trust (Montana)
High Plains Architects (Montana)
homeWORD (Montana)

Human Resource Development Council, Inc. (Montana)
Journeys from Home (Montana)
Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department (Montana)
Mainstreet Uptown Butte (Montana)
Missoula Advocates for Sustainable Transportation (Montana)
Missoula Downtown Association (Montana)
Montana Council on Developmental Disabilities (Montana)
Montana Independent Living Project (Montana)
Opportunity Link (Montana)
New Mexico Chapter of the American Planning Association (New Mexico)
Sharon Thomas, City Councilor, District 6 (New Mexico)
Good News Mountaineer Garage (West Virginia)