



May 9, 2012

Dear Senator Nelson,

BikeWalkLee is a citizen-based community coalition in Lee County, Florida, that works to raise public awareness and advocate for complete streets and a balanced multi-modal transportation system. We are writing to urge you, as a conferee on the transportation bill, to fight for a final bill that follows the template of the Senate-passed bipartisan MAP-21 legislation.

Lee County elected officials, both at the Metropolitan Planning Organization and Board of County Commissioners, have shown strong support for a more balanced multi-modal transportation system and one that ensures that our roads are safe and accessible for all road users. BikeWalkLee, as well as our elected officials, have written you several times in the past year about this bill, and have also written commentaries in the local papers about the importance to our community of congressional action on this legislation. I have attached an excellent March 21st op-ed by Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah outlining why the Senate transportation bill is supported in our community.

We are pleased to see progress being made on reauthorizing the nation's surface transportation law. This is a crucial time for our nation's infrastructure priorities. We must reform our federal program to be prudent with existing dollars while making a down payment on the future—repairing our 20th century network and building the transportation options we need to be competitive in a 21st century economy. As you move forward conferencing Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (MAP-21) with H.R. 4348's transportation policy provisions, we strongly encourage you to retain policies that will help build a more robust and multimodal transportation network while enhancing local control and increasing transparency and accountability.

Specifically, we urge you to include provisions in the conference agreement that represent significant reforms and were the result of a carefully crafted bipartisan compromise in the Senate's MAP-21 bill. These provisions have bipartisan and bicameral support:

(1) Provide local access to funding for community-based transportation initiatives. Members in both chambers agree that local leaders – who know the transportation, safety, and economic development needs of their constituents – should have more direct control over funds and projects in their communities. MAP-21 contains provisions that will empower local governments to program funds for projects that help revitalize main streets and improve safety and access for everyone, whether traveling by car, transit, bicycle, or foot. MAP-21 helps local communities build out a full transportation network under the “Additional Activities” program by sub-allocating funds to larger regions and offering competitive grants for others. Empowering local communities to program their tax dollars can help renew economic vitality, make areas more

attractive for businesses, residents, and private investment while improving health and safety for everyone.

Having safe places to walk and bike is particularly important for Florida because our state is the most dangerous state in the nation for pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities. The citizens of Lee County as well as our elected officials strongly support investments in walking and biking facilities and providing local control over these funds needs to be protected in conference. It is also important to protect the "Safe Streets" policy in the Senate bill, that will require federally funded road projects in Florida to meet federal standards for safely accommodating all road users. We know the importance of Lee County's complete streets policy and welcome a federal policy that complements and enhances our local efforts.

Today's release by America Bikes of the findings of a recent Princeton survey are a clear message to Congress--more than 80 percent of Americans favor maintaining or increasing federal funding for sidewalks and bike lanes. The results show that Republicans, Democrats, residents in every region of the country, and every age group strongly support these investments. Americans want safe places to bike and walk and the bill coming out of this conference needs to respond to the desires of American citizens.

(2) Prioritize the repair of our existing infrastructure. We must ensure funds will be used to fix our communities' bridges and roads in need of repair regardless of who owns them. Our economic vitality and safety depend on functioning infrastructure, but only half of our major roadways are in good condition and over 69,000 of our nation's bridges are structurally deficient. As adopted by the Senate, MAP-21 provides dedicated funding for the repair of bridges and roads as well as financial incentives for states to properly maintain critical infrastructure. We support ensuring that our existing repair dollars are used to get the best results by addressing our backlog of deficient bridges and poorly maintained roads, regardless of ownership.

(3) Promote transparency and accountability in the planning process. We face many transportation challenges, from congestion to air quality to goods movement, and our limited dollars must be spent in smart ways that address multiple issues at once. MAP-21 moves in this direction by ensuring that states and regions develop and use performance measures in their long-range planning and short-term programming. This approach provides strong assurances to taxpayers that their dollars are spent in a way that demonstrates performance and accountability.

(4) Allow flexibility for local public transit funding. MAP-21 would provide transit agencies – during times of economic crisis – more local control of their federal transit funds in order to preserve existing service and avoid harmful fare increases. In light of high gas prices, it is even more important to enable the people who know the needs of the area best to make these decisions. This will allow local officials to choose to preserve critical services in these times of high demand so that millions of Americans can continue to benefit from frequent, reliable, and affordable public transportation.

(5) Ensure the public and local officials can meaningfully participate in project reviews. We are concerned that provisions in the House bill would seriously erode the ability of local communities and stakeholders to have a say in major infrastructure projects that affect them.

We support faster construction of projects that have had a full public vetting. MAP-21's policies would speed up the process by consolidating programs and regulatory reviews, but H.R. 4348 goes too far with provisions that significantly weaken basic environmental and health protections and severely restrict opportunities for public input.

We urge you and all of the conferees to work expeditiously to pass a transportation bill and deliver the clear direction and certainty that have been missing since the last bill expired in 2009. Thank you again for your leadership and we look forward to working with you to deliver the type of forward-looking transportation authorization bill that our nation and our communities desperately need.

Sincerely,

/s/

Darla Letourneau
on behalf of
BikeWalkLee

Attachment: News-Press March 21, 2012 Guest Opinion by Commissioner Ray Judah: "Senate's transportation bill beats House's"

March 21, 2012

Guest opinion: Senate's transportation bill beats House's

Ray Judah

Congress is racing toward a March 31 deadline to pass a much-needed update to our national transportation program. While the Senate overwhelmingly passed (74-22) its bipartisan transportation bill on March 14, the House has stalled while its leaders continue to push for a more extreme bill.

During the Senate deliberations, Lee County officials supported an amendment to protect bicycle/pedestrian funding for cities and towns, and we are pleased this amendment was in the final Senate bill. We are also pleased that the Senate-passed bill includes a provision for a "Safe Streets" policy requiring federally funded road projects in Florida to meet federal standards for safely accommodating all road users. We know the importance of Lee County's complete streets policy and welcome a federal policy that complements and enhances our local efforts.

Now the action shifts to the House, which is considering a transportation bill that's terrible for the residents and the local governments of Florida. The bill:

Ends three decades of dedicated federal funding for public transportation. Both the Lee County commissioners and the Metropolitan Planning Organization sent letters to U.S. Rep. Connie Mack IV, strongly objecting to this provision. The opposition has been so intense that the House leadership had to regroup and is considering deletion of this provision.

Takes away local control, planning authority and resources. While the House bill talks about devolving power away from Washington, it actually takes away some of the latitude local governments now have. Current federal transportation law is a shared partnership between states and local governments and is an effective approach to distribution of limited transportation dollars. However, a provision in the House bill allows a governor to force major interstate highway projects upon local communities, overruling local vision and comprehensive transportation plans.

The Lee County MPO has spent a great deal of effort developing a Long-Range Transportation Plan that reflects local needs and priorities. To think that state leaders, who are out of touch with local needs, could unilaterally require changes to our transportation plan undermines the role Congress set forth when it created the MPOs in 1973. To that end, MPO members passed a resolution March 16 urging House support of the Senate bill.

Ends the Safe Routes to School program and other dedicated funding to make streets safer for walking and bicycling. Florida is the most dangerous state in the nation for pedestrians and cyclists. However, funding projects to improve safety for pedestrians and cyclists would be totally at the whim of the governor and FDOT if this House bill passes — and their track record of spending on ped/bike projects is poor.

Fails to hold states accountable for fixing crumbling bridges and rutted highways. It off-loads responsibility for thousands of deficient bridges to local governments.

Increases dependence on oil. The bill opens up swaths of the country for drilling, including the Gulf of Mexico off the Florida coast, with the intention of diverting a share of leasing fees to the transportation program. Tying infrastructure to drilling means increasing, not reversing, dependence on fossil fuels.

Abandons any true “national” interest in transportation. Rather than thinking of transportation as a national priority to help the country compete in the global economy, the bill sets the stage for treating transportation investments like block grants, with no national system.

The country desperately needs a new transportation bill that provides robust funding and updates national priorities and policy for the needs of this century. Luckily, the House can follow the Senate’s lead and pass a similar bipartisan bill. The Senate bill achieves much of what House leaders say they want, such as consolidating and eliminating programs and streamlining the approval process for faster project delivery. The current transportation program runs out on March 31, so the House needs to act quickly or they are courting another shutdown of a major government function.

There is much at stake for Lee County’s future in this national debate on transportation legislation. I urge the House to quickly pass a bipartisan bill along the lines of the Senate-passed bill.
