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OPEN LETTER TO SECRETARY MINETA

Honorable Norman Y. Mineta, Secretary
Department of Transportation
400 South 7th Street SW
Washington, DC 20590

23 May 2006

Dear Secretary Mineta,

I have been a professor and consultant to cities in many countries, published books and testified before the U.S. Congress on transportation policy for over 40 years. You may remember that we met at some transportation meetings many years ago. I am writing this letter to comment on your recent transportation policies and actions.

In your Guest Editorial in the January-February issue of "Public Roads" you pointed out the increasing problem of mobility for our senior citizens. As their number grows, our country faces an increasing problem of inadequate mobility for a large segment of our population. You presented an excellent description of this situation, but failed to identify its primary causes. The condition of our national transportation system is largely responsible for the problems facing not only seniors, but many other population groups also. Moreover, some of the policies you advocate work against the solutions for this problem.

As people age, driving becomes not only more difficult, but also more dangerous for them and for others, as highway accident statistics clearly show. It is therefore well known that senior citizens increasingly use public transportation in cities and Amtrak, planes and buses for intercity travel. In our cities, as well as in most of our peer countries, seniors use transit extensively whenever a decent service is provided.

Automobile dependency - transportation based on private cars which leaves large segments of population without any reasonable alternative - represents a very serious national problem. Without attractive and efficient public transportation, senior citizens, together with the young, non-drivers and non-auto-owners, are second-class citizens with respect to mobility.

Your discussion of the problem of transportation for senior citizens does not mention the problem of auto dependency. Similarly, President Bush talks correctly about our "addiction to cheap oil," but he seems to believe there is a single solution -- alternate energy sources.

Actually, the problem requires multiple solutions, particularly reducing our auto dependency through a genuinely intermodal transportation system, the concept endorsed in principle by all federal transportation acts since the ISTEA of 1991.

This analysis leads to another, related set of your activities that should be challenged: your personal and the Bush Administration's extremely hostile policy toward Amtrak. You have done your best to divert the discussions about Amtrak from the basic goal -- creating a modern, efficient national passenger rail system -- to the problems with the means to reach that goal - current financial problems of Amtrak. These problems are mostly the result of Federal Government's national transportation policy.

The situation with Amtrak should be seen in perspective as follows. Ever since its founding in 1971, Amtrak has been financed mostly at the level of year-to-year survival. Federal funding was never adequate to allow investment for developing a modern passenger railroad system. Amtrak has managed to resolve a substantial part of its inherited excess costs and labor inefficiencies, and continues to do so. However, no organization can find the means and employee morale to vigorously develop a long-range plan when it has to fight for immediate survival. Inadequately funded, Amtrak is then continuously criticized for its operating deficits!

Both the Clinton Administration and Congress made things only worse by requiring Amtrak in 1997 to follow the "Glide path to self-sufficiency," the requirement no passenger transportation mode could achieve! As you certainly know, our air transportation system obtains extensive federal support, but through indirect and well hidden forms (general fund contributions to air traffic control, tax exempt bonds for airport construction, research and development, etc.). Should we mention highways, where well over 40% of the roughly \$165 billion per year from all levels of government comes from non-user payments?

By comparison, this makes federal assistance to Amtrak of molecular size. Yet, highway subsidies are quoted in annual amounts and referred to as "federal investments," while Amtrak subsidies are always compounded for its entire life. Although this 35-year sum is still much smaller than annual highway subsidies, Amtrak is continuously criticized as "near-bankrupt," "inefficient" and "heavily subsidized by tax-payers."

Most of our peer industrialized countries see passenger railroads as an increasingly important transportation system to provide an attractive alternative for large volumes of travel in ranges from 50 to 500 miles, as well as across the country. That has led to large investments in construction of high-speed rail networks in no less than 14 countries! With increasing highway travel and oil consumption, passenger rail has acquired steadily growing importance in preventing congestion and auto dependency.

Our country, which has the most serious problem of auto dependency, does not show awareness of this problem. Nor does it have a clear vision of what the role of passenger rail should be. Our Federal policy consists of propaganda against Amtrak focusing on its financial crisis. It was not confidence-inspiring to see firing of David Gunn, widely recognized as the most capable person to lead Amtrak. Moreover, the fact that for the second consecutive year you have eliminated the Next Generation High Speed Rail Development Program suggests that your rhetoric against Amtrak's long-distance trains masks contempt for all forms of intercity passenger rail.

Many of your speeches about Amtrak have contained numerous factual and conceptual inaccuracies and distortions, as has been shown by many transportation professionals, including the National Association of Railroad Passengers – NARP. That organization has also produced the only document with vision about an efficient rail passenger system our country needs.

May I respectfully suggest that as the Secretary of Transportation, you should produce a positive, constructive and realistic plan for creation of a sound national passenger rail system. Such a plan should be based on the following facts:

1. In all corridors which passenger rail serves, shift of trips from freeways to Amtrak has benefits on both sides: it justifies improving the rail service, and decreases highway congestion.
2. For trips up to 300 miles (with high-speed rail up to 500 miles) rail center-to-center city travel which allows walking around, meeting fellow passengers and enjoying scenic views is superior to air and bus travel in strapped seats, and it can attract many trips from the automobile, which the other modes cannot.
3. Long-distance travel on the national rail network, if convenient and reasonably priced, has multiple important roles, such as service to many smaller cities without bus service, travel by persons who do not want to or cannot fly, families, students and tourists, domestic and foreign.
4. Amtrak's ability to attract passengers in both dense corridors and across the country is clearly demonstrated by increasing ridership despite the extremely high fares which have been forced on Amtrak to charge, particularly since 1997.
5. The U.S. rail system is by its nature and geography an interstate function, and therefore even more in the domain of the federal government than highways.
6. You are correct that further efforts on increasing Amtrak's operating efficiency and passenger-friendly policies and attitudes should continue to be vigorously pursued.
7. Financing: the amount of \$1.5 to \$2.0 billion annually for basic Amtrak operations and capital is minute compared to federal financing of other modes of transportation. Different options can be considered for providing several billion dollars annually to finance development of an efficient and attractive national rail system, such as the bonding proposals by Senators Lott and Lautenberg or a "nickel for Amtrak" in federal tax on gasoline. Despite public opposition to the growing price of gasoline, increases of up to 50 cents/gallon have been accepted by auto drivers with very little reduction of driving – which would be our national goal anyway.
8. Our tourism industry is also hampered by its excessive car-dependency. In that respect, we are not competitive with our peers, such as Europe, Japan and Australia. An efficient national rail network would greatly increase attraction of tourists because they would not be totally car-dependent.

On a broader scale, I suggest that you, as well as the entire Administration including President Bush, recognize that the “addiction of Americans to cheap oil” is not a set of frivolous habits, but a result of federal and state policies that have led to the present auto dependency, affecting the majority of our population. Although we need alternate energy sources, they will not increase mobility of the elderly nor decrease the problems of auto dependency, highway congestion and environmental degradation.

Development of an attractive and efficient national passenger rail system, a properly financed Amtrak with support of the Administration, would be a major step forward.

Respectfully yours,

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