

NEWS ALERT



U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Homeland Security Committee

Rep. Bennie G. Thompson, Chairman



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson “Rail and Public Transportation Security Act of 2007”

March 6, 2007 (WASHINGTON) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the full Committee hearing on the Committee Print entitled “Rail and Public Transportation Security Act of 2007”:

“Like all Americans, I am alarmed at the lack of security for rail and public transportation systems around the country. Each weekday, 11.3 million passengers in 22 states use commuter, heavy, or light rail. History has shown that terrorists view rail and public transportation systems as potential targets.

This coming Sunday will be the three-year anniversary of the terrorist bombings of Madrid’s rail system, which killed and maimed hundreds of innocent civilians. This coming July marks the second anniversary of the terrorist bombings throughout London’s public transportation system. Last summer, a number of bombs tore through Mumbai’s rail system. Just last month, a passenger train outside New Delhi caught fire when suitcases filled with flammable liquids were exploded as the train headed for Pakistan.

Despite all of these attacks, rail and public transportation security remains a secondary issue to aviation security.

The 9/11 Act that Congress passed in 2004 directed TSA to develop a National Strategy for Transportation Security. TSA produced a document, but it was not a comprehensive strategy.

The President directed the Department of Homeland Security to complete a Transportation Sector Specific Plan more than 3 years ago. This plan has yet to be completed.

Last December, the President issued an Executive Order directing the Department of Homeland Security to strengthen surface transportation security. Yet, in the fiscal year 2008 budget, the President only requested an additional 4 million dollars for TSA’s surface transportation budget.

TSA’s entire surface transportation budget is less than 1% of the amount the President requested for aviation security. Similarly, I am concerned about the money the President has requested for rail and public transportation security grants. 175 million dollars for rail and public transportation security grants is not enough money when one considers the millions of men and women who use these systems daily.

I am also concerned about the lack of training for front-line rail and public transportation workers. Labor organizations say that their members are not being given the training to respond to acts of terrorism. According to the National Transit Institute (NTI), only about 30% of the transit employee workforce has received the proper training developed by the NTI and federal agencies. Shouldn’t training for our frontline workers be mandatory and ongoing?

I am also worried about security issues surrounding the transportation of hazardous materials. In a survey completed by the Teamsters last year, rail workers reported that equipment and HAZMAT shipments were left unattended and unsecured. Additionally, dangerous HAZMAT shipments still pass through populated areas, even where an alternative route is feasible. I know DHS and DOT have issued proposed regulations that address some of these HAZMAT issues, but I am worried they do not go far enough.

It is as though the Administration is waiting for the worst case scenario before taking aggressive action.

Well, this Committee has taken action. We have been working on a bipartisan basis to develop the "Rail and Public Transportation Security Act of 2007." I appreciate Subcommittee Chairwoman Jackson-Lee marking up a draft of this bill last week, and I appreciate the cooperation we have received from the Minority to date.

This bill will require rail and public transportation systems to complete security plans and vulnerability assessments. Right now these plans are only completed on a voluntary basis. The bill will also mandate training for frontline rail and public transportation system employees. It will also give them whistleblower protections to encourage reporting of security risks. Thanks to an amendment offered by Representatives Perlmutter and Jackson-Lee, the bill also provides a redress process for employees who are terminated during a background check.

The bill will also make security grants available to rail, transit, and bus systems. Finally, the bill will make substantial investments in the research and development we need to find new ways to secure these systems.

My hope is that through these provisions, this bill will address most of the glaring gaps that currently exist in surface transportation security. I look forward to working with my colleagues on this Committee in getting this bill passed as soon as possible. Let me also say that negotiations on this bill are continuing with Chairman Oberstar and the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. In the past, jurisdictional disputes have prevented good bills that would improve national security from passing Congress. Chairman Oberstar and I are committed to working together to produce a bill that will strengthen rail and public transportation security."

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