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Testimony of Chris Zimmerman
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Arlington County, Virginia

Before the
Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming
United States House of Representatives
2203 Rayburn House Office Building
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“Transportation Routes to Reduce Climate Change: Modes, Materials and Methodology”

Introduction

Good Morning Chairman Markey, Vice Chairman Blumenauer, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and Members of the Select Committee.

My name is Chris Zimmerman and I am a Member of the County Board in Arlington, Virginia. I also serve on the Board of Directors of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, the Transportation Planning Board for the National Capital Region, the Northern Virginia Transportation Authority, the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission, and the Virginia Railway Express Operations Board.

I appreciate the opportunity to be with you today to discuss Arlington County’s vision, efforts and plans to build a transportation system that is good for our citizens, our nation’s energy security and our environment.

Transportation in Arlington: Multi-Modal Strategies and Investment

In Arlington, we have shown that individual communities can support increased economic activity, population and job growth while also reducing the reliance on automobile travel and associated vehicle miles traveled (VMT) growth. In fact, Arlington is one of the few places in the country that has managed to grow without significantly increasing traffic, benefiting not only the people who choose to walk, bike, or take transit, but also those who choose to drive.

Between 1996 and 2008, Arlington County added 13,000 housing units, over 1,300 hotel rooms, 5.5 million square feet of office space, over 1.3 million square feet of retail, over 23,000 residents and 11,000 workers. During that same period, traffic trends were flat and transit ridership grew by over 44%. While Arlington is small geographically, roughly one-third of all transit trips in the Commonwealth of Virginia either begin or end in Arlington, representing over 83 million trips per year. Our experience in Arlington has shown that when given a range of transportation choices, individuals will choose alternative modes that benefit the environment, the community, and their own quality of life.

To achieve this level of success, Arlington has focused our efforts and investments on providing and promoting affordable, convenient, and integrated transportation choices. In the area of road improvements, Arlington has focused on constructing and managing our street network to be “Complete Streets”, making them safe and comfortable for pedestrians, bicyclists, transit riders, motorists, and other users. We have also invested heavily in expanding and completing the bikeway network with a focus on high-quality facilities, overcoming barriers, and facilitating overall connectivity, resulting in an increasing number of bicycle commuters. We have also worked with residential and commercial partners to provide and promote comprehensive travel information and transit encouragement through Arlington Transportation Partners, four commuter stores, and special initiatives such as BikeArlington and WalkArlington.

Additionally, as we are located in the core of a rapidly growing region and at the confluence of major regional transportation facilities, Arlington has sought to integrate our local facilities and services with those of neighboring jurisdictions to enhance regional connections wherever possible. For example, while WMATA operates the regional bus network, the fifth largest in the United States, Arlington has created Arlington Transit (ART) as the county’s local bus service to provide service deeper into local neighborhoods. ART works with the region by operating under the Regional Fare Policy – charging the same fare as Metrobus, accepting Metrobus tokens and flash passes, as well as accepting transfers from all bus systems in the region. Through the extension of this bus network through complementary service, we have been enormously successful in attracting new riders to transit. From Fiscal Year 1999, when ART services were initiated, through Fiscal Year 2007, ridership has increased 632%, from just fewer than 145,000 passenger trips to just over 1,100,000 passenger trips annually.

Thankfully, we have moved beyond the question of how to get people to take public transportation – they are already doing it. To answer this demand, we must continue to invest more funding in public transportation and focus on how to move people, not simply move more cars.

Smart Growth

It is important to point out that although there are many short and mid-term actions that can be taken to increase transit ridership and reduce VMT, the most effective and complete way to address these issues requires long-term community planning centered on smart growth principles and transit oriented development. Arlington has been in the forefront of this for over 30 years.

During the creation of the Metro system, Arlington County argued successfully for the creation of an underground route along an old commercial corridor of the County as opposed to the original planned route along the median of I-66. The County then developed a general land use plan centered around these Metro corridors that focused on creating distinctive “urban villages” around each station area, with a mix of commercial and residential uses. By organizing community development and redevelopment around high quality and high capacity transit and designing and operating our transportation facilities to be compatible with this development, the County has worked to create distinct mixed-use neighborhoods where our residents can live, work and play.

The Federal Role

The most important actions that can be taken by the federal government in support of these policies are ones that you have heard many times over – increased funding, prioritization of transit and increased coordination. Currently, federal funding for transit programs accounts for only 20% of overall surface transportation funding. While I understand there are pressing needs in the area of highways and bridges, we cannot accomplish our transportation and environmental goals with this disproportionate level of investment in transit. The federal government must recalibrate its investments in the transportation sector in such a way as to invest more heavily in multimodal strategies. The resources are simply not available at the regional or local level to provide for transit operating expenses while at the same time making the appropriate capital investments to ensure our transportation networks have the coverage, integration, and reliability necessary not only keep up with current demand, but to provide a level of mobility and access that will make public transportation an attractive option for our citizens.

There are also coordination and organizational issues that hamper the effective application of federal programs and funding. Better coordination across organizations within the Department of Transportation as well as between departments, such as the Departments of Transportation, Energy, Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency will help establish a broader view of the role of transit in building sustainable communities.

From a policy standpoint, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) has typically focused on short-sighted metrics such as new transit riders and travel time savings while overlooking integrated transportation networks and the importance of transit’s role in focusing community development. Despite the promise of the Small Starts program when it was established by Congress, FTA has narrowly focused on cost effectiveness criteria as opposed to project effectiveness criteria, which would take into consideration the effectiveness of the project to reduce per capita travel demand in the project corridor, the ability of the project to double the density in the project corridor as compared to

density in the rest of urbanized area; and the potential for the project, when combined with appropriate land use and economic development actions, to reduce per capita greenhouse gas emissions. Likewise, the Federal Highway Administration also make changes, beginning with the prioritization of investments in areas that promote travel choice, such as complete streets. I was encouraged by the statements of Secretary LaHood and Secretary Donovan yesterday on the creation of the Sustainable Communities Task Force, and I believe this will go a long way to coordinating all issues related to sustainability.

Closing

Mr. Chairman, Arlington County applauds your leadership in convening this hearing and I thank you again for the opportunity to testify today.

We could not be having this discussion at a more important moment for the future of public transportation. The confluence of the important issues of global climate change, reducing our dependence on foreign oil, investing in our nation's infrastructure, and spurring long-term economic growth create the opportunity to fundamentally change the way people move for years to come. Never before have our citizens been as interested in and willing to use public transportation, and we must act now to make it more affordable, accessible and available in communities throughout the United States. This must be a joint effort among all levels of government and we look forward to being your partner.

I am pleased to answer any questions you may have.