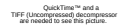

Testimony before the House Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Urban Development

By John Norquist, President and CEO, Congress for the New Urbanism, March 19, 2007

(Numbers in parentheses refer to slides shown by Mr. Norquist)

(1) Chairman Olver and distinguished members of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, thank you for the privilege of appearing before you. I deeply appreciate your efforts to join the issues of transportation and neighborhood development. In government it is easy to get overly focused on narrow specialties. It's important to break out of silos and look for synergies that can benefit the people as you are doing on this committee.

One of these specialties is traffic engineering. Current road policy (2) has focused on highways, arterials, and collectors as individual road segments with the goal of reducing congestion by adding lane capacity and separating the street from the built environment. In other words (3), getting everything out of the way of the traffic. The system depends on large road types that attract traffic (4) and ultimately grow congested, particularly at rush hour when you need the roads most.

For thousands of years of human history, urban thoroughfares have served three purposes – movement, commerce and social interaction. This is the street (5) that engineers were trained to build in the first half of the twentieth century — 50 feet of pavement and 8 foot sidewalks. This street, Kinnickinnic Avenue in Milwaukee, clearly fulfills the three traditional functions of an urban thoroughfare. Here (6) are three of these streets coming together in Wicker Park in Chicago. And in this economy, places like this are holding their value.

Average streets today, however, (7) are built for only one purpose, moving traffic. There are huge setbacks so the road can be widened later. There is no money left over for sidewalks, so people can walk in the dirt, or as an alternative (8) walk in the gutter.

When you have lots of streets (9) on small blocks as in Northampton, Massachusetts, the east side of Detroit (10) or Portland's Pearl District (11), the streets don't need to be big. Many streets share the burden, giving travelers lots of choices, including walking.

My hometown, Milwaukee, has many neighborhoods like this, but like other older US cities, it removed a vast streetcar network and built freeways. This (12) was Walnut

Street, Milwaukee's African American commercial center in 1956. This (13) is how it looked after it was "improved" by the Wisconsin Highway Department. These big roads generate dirt and noise. Neighbors demand sound barriers and the ones that work best are steel reinforced concrete (14). This may be the only surviving technology of the old East German Communist government (15). Former leaders of East Germany no longer have their wall in Berlin, but could feel right at home (15) on Dr. Martin Luther King Drive in San Antonio.

We now understand that freeways don't last forever. In 1973, (17) New York City's elevated West Side Highway collapsed (18) and was eventually replaced by a street (19). With views of the Hudson restored, Manhattan's lower West Side gained residents, jobs and vitality. In 1989 (20) an earthquake damaged the Embarcadero Freeway, which had replaced a boulevard in 1950. The boulevard is now restored (21), the freeway is gone and jobs and residents are back. Even the traffic has improved since the boulevard helps distribute cars more evenly across the grid. In Milwaukee (22), without an earthquake, we removed a freeway segment, (23) replacing empty lots and surface parking with (24) the beginnings of good redevelopment. The most dramatic change can be seen in Seoul, South Korea where (25) an elevated roadway built over a river at the end of the Korean War was replaced in 2005 with (26) two surface streets on each side of the restored river.

This (27) is the man responsible, Lee Meoung-Bak, elected mayor in 2001. See how happy he is. He had the courage to do the right thing and now he's President. He was successful because he embraced the complexity of the city, rising above the narrow concerns of the traffic specialists. He saw the whole, the combination of river, neighborhood and infrastructure as greater than the sum of its parts.

CNU and our allies at the Institute of Transportation Engineers have been collaborating on exciting reforms to make transportation work for people and communities, not just their cars. (28). In cooperation with FHWA and EPA we have developed a manual that provides design guidelines to resurrect the street, avenue and boulevard. These are road types the Federal and State departments of transportation should support.

(29,30) The next step is to plan urban and suburban transportation movements around highly connected networks of streets and transit rather than just individual road segments. (31,32) The street network absorbs and distributes traffic just as wetlands absorb and cleanse water. And the grid serves as a setting for valuable economic and social activity just as the wetlands providing rich habitats for diverse plant and animal life.

These networks make life convenient and strengthen the bonds of community. They also dramatically reduce household driving and lower household greenhouse gas emissions. Residents of Atlantic Station (33), a new neighborhood with a walkable street network on the site of a former can plant in Atlanta, drive an average of eight miles per

day compared to a regional average of 34 miles per day, according to the US EPA.

Through its partnership with the United States Green Building Council and the Natural Resources Defense Council (34), CNU helped create the nation's first certification system for green development at the neighborhood scale. And to qualify, these green neighborhoods must have highly connected networks of walkable streets, with at least 150 intersections per square mile (including alleys). The broad, funnel-like highways and arterials that the federal government typically funds lead to high carbon emissions and simply don't have a place in green neighborhoods. These roads should no longer serve as the centerpiece of federal road policy.

Research by the Center for Neighborhood Technology and the Brookings Institution confirms that neighborhoods with connected street networks and transit service give families real relief from high transportation costs. (Find interactive maps featuring these results for more than 50 U.S. regions at htaindex.cnt.org.)

Consumer preferences show that people are eager to live in complete, convenient, walkable neighborhoods (35, 36, 37). Future transportation policy should support this preference. Transportation investments should be at a compatible scale with the neighborhood. They should build on rather than undermine the efficiency and environmental performance of walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

I urge you to take advantage of opportunities to realign federal transportation policies around sustainable transportation networks.

- Thanks to Senators Carper and Specter and Representatives La Tourette and Blumenauer, the CLEAN TEA legislation now promotes investment in new, local street and transit construction that enhances network connectivity and performance. That legislations deserves our full support.
- Likewise, the T4 Reauthorization is an opportunity to further direct investment towards infrastructure that adds value to communities. Key CLEAN TEA provisions should be incorporated in T4 to help move it beyond the predictable highways vs. transit modal split debate. States and regions that receive T4 funds must have plans that take into account the carbon impact of their transportation investments. Such planning will lead communities to high-performance street and transit networks that achieve transportation and economic development goals through cost-effective use of federal dollars.
- Progressive transportation engineers at CNU and ITE realize that the federal highway program must evolve into a federal networks program. Congress can help speed that transition by asking the FHWA to extend its successful context-sensitive thoroughfares project into a project that provides research and guidelines for the sustainable networks formed by those streets.

Our new President has declared his commitment to reforming and improving transportation. We need only look to the Internet, employed to so effectively by his election campaign, for a telling example of how 21st century transportation systems should work. Internet traffic makes use of a network of linkages, breaking up large volumes of data into small packets and distributing them through a web of available nodes. It's fast and it's reliable. The same model applied to transportation networks will allow all modes of traffic to flow over multiple routes, making travel times quicker, making driving, walking and bicycling easier, and making transit service and emergency response more effective.

CNU, the Institute for Transportation Engineers, the Center for Neighborhood Technology, and THE T4 America Coalition are ready to help you get transportation moving in the right direction.