

The Honorable Michael E. McMahon (NY-13)
Testimony before the Committee on the Budget
U.S. House of Representatives
March 11, 2009

Chairman Spratt, Ranking Member Ryan, thank you for providing this opportunity for all Members to testify before the Budget Committee today. This Committee serves a critical role in allowing the Congress to manage the budget process and control government spending. And I would like to offer a particular thank you to Chairman Spratt for your leadership on working to get our fiscal house in order and reduce the size of the federal deficit.

While we still have yet to see many of the details of the President's budget submission, the President's preliminary budget lays out a bold, ambitious agenda for our country. Our nation is in crisis – we face the most serious economic downturn since the Great Depression, and our people are suffering. Each month brings another half a million people losing their jobs, and unemployment is skyrocketing. Students can't get loans for college and small businesses are struggling to secure credit to keep their doors open on Main Street.

All eyes are watching us here in Washington. And we need to act now. From turning our economy around, to reforming our healthcare system, to fighting terrorism and protecting the homeland, to reducing our dependence on foreign oil, to combating global warming, to rebuilding our outdated infrastructure, and improving our education system – we are

facing so many enormous challenges. But we can no longer wait to address them.

With all that said, I would urge this committee to follow the leadership of Chairman Spratt and work on all these issues in a way that is fiscally responsible. We must do what is necessary to jump start our economy now, but long-term we must work to bring our budget into balance.

I have two children – Joseph and Julia – and we cannot in good conscience pile more and more debt on them and mortgage the future of the next generation. The good hardworking people of Staten Island and Brooklyn, New York balance their checkbooks at the end of each month – and they expect nothing less from their leaders in Washington.

This budget will be a key test for us in the Congress. Will we bring the leadership that the American people are demanding? Will we change the way business is done in Washington and make the necessary investments to rebuild our country's future?

As challenging as these times are for our nation, they present us with opportunities to really make the key investments that will rescue our economy and lay the foundation for future economic growth for years to come.

Specifically, I come here today to ask all of you to include in the budget significant funding increases in our nation's transportation infrastructure. Bang for the buck, nothing will help us create more jobs than funding transportation projects and rehabilitating our crumbling mass transit, roads and bridges. It

is estimated that for every billion dollars we spend on capital transportation spending, we create more than 37,000 jobs.

Adding funding for mass transit and other transportation projects won't only help jump start our economy, but it also will help improve the commutes of millions of Americans every day. The spike in oil prices during the summer of 2008 forced many Americans to try mass transit for the first time, sending bus, train and subway ridership to record levels. And even though gas prices have come down in recent months, studies have found that many people have simply chosen to continue using mass transit – and ridership has just gone up and up.

My district has some of the longest average commute times in the country – with people travelling well over an hour and a half each way to work! Traffic congestion grows every year, and our economy is suffering because of our failure to invest in mass transit. The last time we made major investments in the transportation network of my district was more than 40 years ago with the opening of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge in 1964. Many of our subway stations are almost eighty years old – and some are in such bad shape that they are literally falling apart.

But unfortunately my district is far from unique. Americans are demanding more support for mass transit across the board. This Congress has a once in a generation opportunity to really rethink our transportation network – and to make the key investments that will give this country the 21st Century, integrated, well-maintained transportation network that the American people deserve.

As you begin to markup the Fiscal Year 2010 Budget Resolution, I urge you to include a large increase in the amount that can be appropriated for mass transit, highways, bridges, and airports – both in new construction projects and in funds to maintain our aging structures.

I also would urge all of you to dedicate significant resources to increase federal support for the operational budgets for municipalities and regional transit systems throughout the nation. Providing funds for operations will help ensure that we maintain current transit routes, and that mass transit remains a viable option for Americans no matter what their income level. In New York City, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority this year is considering a doomsday budget that would raise fares by almost 25% and scale back service and maintenance. These cuts would eliminate many necessary bus and subway routes and set our system back decades. And I am sorry to say that New York isn't the only city facing such dire straits.

At a time when more and more people want to ride our buses and our rails, we cannot cutback on the services they have come to rely on. Mass transit is great for our economy by reducing traffic, great for our environment by reducing vehicle carbon emissions, and great for the health of our neighbors and our communities by encouraging people to walk more.

Our budget is a statement of our priorities. So as you prepare the budget resolution that will guide the debate in the months ahead, I urge you to greatly increase the amount of resources dedicated in the budget to fund capital projects and mass transit operating budgets for agencies at every level of government.

Transportation is key to our nation's growth and future competitiveness – China, Europe are all investing hundreds of billions in their transportation networks, and we must be willing to make the key investments that will propel our own nation forward and leave a lasting physical, usable legacy for years to come.

Also Mr. Chairman, as a Member of the Committee on Foreign Affairs and a representative of one of the most diverse Congressional Districts in the United States, I urge the Committee to maintain and increase our foreign assistance commitment to our allies around the world. I particularly urge the Committee to fund Israel's foreign military financing assistance as well as fulfill the Commitment of Secretary Clinton for the United States to rebuild Gaza, and provide support to democratic institutions and civil society in the Palestinian territories. In addition, I urge the Committee to reaffirm the Obama Administration's plan to double US foreign assistance, commitment to the United Nations and multi-lateral institutions.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify today and I yield back the balance of my time.