

Testimony of Congressman Paul D. Tonko

House Committee on Budget

March 18, 2009

Chairman Spratt, Ranking member Ryan, respected members of the committee, I want to sincerely thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak here today. I represent the twenty first congressional district of New York, the area is also known as the Capital Region. The area is home to many towns which saw a boom during the first industrial revolution. However, since those times the area has seen a dwindling population in response to more and more companies closing or moving overseas. In recent years, the area has been heavily involved with luring research companies and funding to help revive the surrounding communities. However, we still have work to do in regard to our education system and our infrastructure to help us lure even more investments into our communities.

Education is the foundation on which our country can grow, but it is often one of the first areas states cut in their budgets when facing fiscal crises. The federal government has not traditionally had a role in school construction, but the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) invested heavily in school infrastructure, especially those with green, energy efficient components. Many of our nation's schools are crumbling, and children's ability to learn in these environments suffers. I hope to see increased education funding in the fiscal year 2010 budget, and especially hope to see more flexibility granted to states in their ability to use this money for green renovation, repair, modernization and construction, similar to the flexibility accorded to states for the use of education related State Fiscal Stabilization Funds in the ARRA.

I also consider the arts a very important part of not only the education of our children, but also our American culture. This sector of the economy has traditionally been supported by philanthropic donations, as well as by state and federal dollars. Unfortunately, because of the economic downturn, many art programs have seen their donations plummet, forcing them to lay off employees and reduce services. The ARRA demonstrated the importance of the arts in job creation and retention by investing \$50 million in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). I hope to see increased funding for the NEA, as well as the National Endowment for the Humanities and other arts funding.

Foreign language instruction, starting from the earliest ages, is a key component to ensuring that the next generation of American workers is equipped to function in an increasingly globalized economy. I advocate a greater emphasis balanced on the importance of foreign language instruction, especially in our elementary school.

Also vitally important for American workers entering the global economy is increased funding for the America COMPETES Act. The science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) education programs authorized in the COMPETES Act will help the next generation of workers prepare to compete globally, advance our efforts to become energy independent, and create new jobs and new exports. Full funding for these programs is essential in reaching these goals.

It is time that Washington fully invests in the sciences and works to truly promote an energy agenda. It is often quoted that "a crisis is a terrible thing to waste." Mr. Chairman, we have a crisis in this country. Our country's energy system is in shambles and it is time for us to lay out the blueprint for a new bold vision here in the United States.

I believe that the budget should do much more to provide funding to agencies like the DOE for programs such as Clean Cities, to promote ways for our urban centers to stop using petroleum based modes of transportation. We need to drill and mine energy efficiency like we currently drill for oil and mine for coal; investment focused on demand-side energy solutions rather than simply through supply-side, diversify our energy portfolio and can be carried out by increased funding in areas such as the Energy Efficient Block Grant Program.

As we did during the Space Race so many years ago, we must turn towards innovation and leadership on the energy front to lead the world again. We can effectively become the standard bearer in energy policy and energy sources by ensuring that we increase funding for Research & Development to put investments towards advanced energy programs -including renewable generation, transmission, carbon capture, methane and allowing for more demonstration projects.

For decades, upstate urban cores, once the center of bustling economic and manufacturing activity, have been slowly eroding away. Urban areas in my district, such as Albany, Troy, Schenectady and Amsterdam to name a few served as the engine for our upstate's economy and growth. However, for decades these cities have sat in a state of disrepair as the population moves away and businesses have dwindled to nothing. For the sake of our economy, environment and the preservation of culture and architecture, we must commit money to better and advance our urban agenda.

In the fiscal year 2010 budget I support increased funding for heritage corridors and area's of historical preservation to improve building facades, demolish unsalvageable buildings and replace and retrofit our buildings to levels of LEED certification. Such resources will not only beautify our downtown corridors but also encourage efficient energy usage and be a model for modernization in blending old buildings with new ideas.

We must also target investments towards waterfront development in waterfront communities. Increasing river access in our downtowns encourages economic development and environmental stewardship. This type of involvement has a high success rate nationally in revitalizing urban communities.

Also, water and sewer infrastructure investments are crucial to redevelop our urban centers. Many of the towns in my district have water and sewer infrastructure which is over 80 years old. For safety, security and developmental needs it is critical that we replace these systems. Local taxpayers cannot bear the entire burden of upgrading this infrastructure but it is essential. Its implementation will encourage economic and population growth in urban areas.

Finally, we must not allow ourselves to fall further behind in today's global economy. We must make a push to increase funding to the rural utility service programs which is run through the USDA. This will provide broadband services in areas which desperately need it and allow our rural citizenry the access to information and commerce they need to compete in today's economy.

Again, I want to thank Chairman Spratt, Ranking Member Ryan and the rest of the committee for allowing me to come in today.