U.S. SENATE BANKING COMMITTEE

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CONTACT: Kate Szostak
202-224-1088
Bryan DeAngelis
202-224-5372

SENATOR CHRISTOPHER J. DODD
"Condition of our Nation's Infrastructure and Proposals for Needed Improvements"

Remarks as Prepared:

The Committee will please come to order. We gather here this morning to examine an issue of paramount importance: the condition of our nation's infrastructure, and proposals for needed improvements to it.

I believe this is an urgent priority for our nation for two fundamental reasons.

First, because the safety and health of all Americans is directly and adversely affected by the deterioration of our roads, bridges, mass transit, drinking water, wastewater removal, and other vital components of our national structure.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that approximately 14,000 Americans die each year at least in part because our roads and bridges are crumbling before our very eyes.

Congestion on our roads causes tons of carbon dioxide and other pollutants to be pumped into the atmosphere day after day. These emissions compromise the health of children and adults, and contribute to global warming, which poses immense risks to the future of all humans.

Tens of millions of Americans receive drinking water in their homes every day from pipes over 100 years old. Here in our nation's capital, in Georgetown – one of the city's most affluent neighborhoods – wastewater is still conveyed through wooden sewage pipes constructed in the nineteenth century.

In the City of Milwaukee, over 400,000 people were sickened several years ago with flu-like symptoms caused by a strain of bacteria in the municipal drinking water system. The bacteria strain was eventually linked to inadequate treatment of the drinking water.

If Americans needed any more proof of the health and safety risks they face from our crumbling infrastructure, they got it on August 1 of last year when a major transportation artery in Minneapolis abruptly collapsed without warning, causing the deaths of 13 people and injuring almost 100.

The second reason why renewing our nation's infrastructure is of utmost importance is that our national prosperity is at stake. From the days of the Roman aqueducts to the present, a nation's ability to grow and prosper has always relied upon its ability to effectively move people, goods, and information. Ask any American today how we're doing in achieving this objective, and chances are the response would be the same: we can do better. When the average American spends 51.5 hours a year in traffic congestion, we can do better. When 33 percent of all urban and rural roads are in poor, mediocre, or fair condition, we can do better. When the United States invests less than two percent of its Gross Domestic Product on infrastructure while countries like China and India invest between seven and twelve percent, we can do better.

There is no question, then, that our nation's infrastructure needs are enormous and immediate. The question for us as policymakers is this: How do we meet these needs? Clearly, the status quo is not in and of itself sufficient.

The American Society of Engineers estimates that an investment of $1.6 trillion over five years is required just to bring our current infrastructure to an acceptable level. That translates into $320 billion a year – just to upgrade existing structures to serve the needs of our nation. At this moment in history, when we are contending with the prospect of significant long-term budget deficits, we must explore other creative and fiscally-responsible ideas by which to fund our nation's infrastructure needs.

Senator Hagel and I have offered one such idea: A National Infrastructure Bank, which would establish a unique and powerful public-private partnership. Using limited Federal resources, it would leverage the significant resources and innovation of the private sector. It would tap the private sector's financial and intellectual power to meet our nation's largest and most critical structural needs. I note that, as today's witnesses demonstrate, support for this initiative spans the ideological spectrum, which – in my view – speaks to its promise.

Some might say that our legislation is "too expensive", or that "we can't afford to implement such a policy". I say we can't afford not to implement it.

The budget resolution on the Senate Floor this week establishes a reserve fund for the specific purpose of meeting our infrastructure needs. I commend Chairman Conrad and Senator Gregg for establishing this fund. It is evidence of a growing consensus in the Congress and the country that complacency can no longer substitute for action.

Let us be clear: the cost of meeting this challenge will be great. But the cost of failing to meet it will be even greater.

From the Erie Canal to the Interstate Highway System, every generation has answered the call to build a safer, stronger, and more prosperous America.

Our time to do the same has come – and that time is short. For the sake of our nation's future, we must not fail.

I appreciate the willingness of our witnesses to share their insights with the Committee today. We look forward to their testimony.

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