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Speech

**REMARKS FOR
THE HONORABLE NORMAN Y. MINETA
SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION**

**NATIONAL HIGHWAY FUNDING COMMISSION
WASHINGTON, DC**

**MAY 24, 2006
9 AM**

This Commission will come to order.

I am pleased and honored to open the National Commission on Highway Funding. And I want to start by thanking all the Commissioners for their willingness to serve.

Our most valuable commodity is time, and you have made the commitment to serve on this Commission and give your time on these critical public policy issues. You have also agreed to serve and bring your experiences, which are vast and varied and which I believe will serve this Commission well in addressing those policy issues.

Because our time is valuable, and because this Commission has much work to do, I am going to be brief in my opening remarks.

Transportation systems and how they should be funded is the purpose of this Commission. By addressing those issues, the Commission will be answering two essential questions – how much... and what kind?

How this Commission addresses these issues will determine its legacy. The measure of any Commission – particularly one created here in Washington, D.C. – is how history judges its contribution.

One outcome is that we will substantially contribute to the future of transportation in this nation. The alternative is what many Commissions succeed in doing – producing a thoughtful, well-written white paper report that becomes one of the more effective doorstops in Washington.

I recommend the first. Here's why.

Transportation is facing a crossroads that I have seen only two other times in my public service career. As on those occasions, there are converging factors in American transportation policy that provide serious challenges, but also a unique set of opportunities.

First, I believe that the politics of earmarking – which has been a staple of transportation policy – is on the wane. It does not benefit any of us to debate the wisdom of earmarking. What can be called infrastructure by influence can also be viewed as representative government responding to local needs.

But the fact remains that Americans are demanding a better prioritization of transportation funding. And I would argue that all Americans will support a national policy that provides for a national transportation funding system that allows America to compete in the global economy while addressing severe congestion problems around the country – not just in the major urban locations.

Second, as most of you know, the Highway Trust Fund is at risk for a variety of reasons. One of the primary motivations behind the creation of this Commission is the recognition that a Trust Fund-based funding system may be insufficient for the future of the system. Regardless of differing views, the fiscal reality is that the current trend lines are a call to action.

Third, in the face of these financial pressures, state and local governments, transportation systems in other countries, and the private sector – interestingly enough, foreign firms – are moving forward with what are called innovative funding streams.

The federal government has fallen behind in recognizing this trend and acting on it. While I am personally proud of the Department of Transportation's far-sightedness in recognizing the public-private partnership issues breaking out across the country, I am also aware that this very day in Congress, a House committee is beginning the process of raising this issue before the Congress.

Finally, are the issues of congestion and capacity and the stark fact that we are reaching a tipping point in both of these areas.

The globalization of the economy has occurred at a speed that even forecasters were unprepared for. The United States is at risk of no longer being able to rely on economic efficiencies from its transportation infrastructure. Our industries are starting to face substantial commercial costs from transportation problems.

And with respect to congestion, the quality of life of an increasing number of Americans is being adversely affected by congestion and the requisite housing costs that require an ever-growing number of Americans to leave for work at dawn and get home just as their children are going to bed. Such a reality has genuine social costs for our fellow citizens, and more and more polling data indicate a future political cost.

The convergence of these factors results in a public policy reality that, as I mentioned earlier, has occurred only twice in my public life. Both times, I believe the federal government answered that call to our nation's benefit.

The first was in the 1955 when, faced with postwar expansion, the Interstate Highway System was developed and built.

The second was in 1991, when the federal government designed and implemented the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. ISTEA was the landmark law which integrated the system in an unprecedented way and vested local and regional authorities with significantly more control over their tax dollars.

This Commission has the opportunity to participate in a similar historic transition. The question is how we will respond. Consensus will be needed. This will be a Commission where dissent will be welcomed in deliberations, not in the final product we produce.

So that is what is before us as we begin. Let me close by speaking to you not only as your Chair, but as someone who has been a Mayor, a Member of Congress, a cabinet Member, a corporate vice president, and a chair of a Commission similar to this one. It is worth observing what a Commission is not. It is not an elected body. It is not a congressional committee. Nor is it a presidential platform committee, a public policy think tank, or a corporate strategic planning department.

All of these for a have important roles to play in the coming policy discussion, but it is not our role.

We are a Commission. That means each of us has literally received exactly that – a commission from the government of the United States.

As commissioned officers of the United States, it is our responsibility to act solely on behalf of the people of the United States as legislated by Congress and signed into law by the President. To be truly successful, we will have to bring our knowledge and rich experiences to this effort – and check our agendas at the Commission door.

Whether we achieve that will determine whether we are part of an historic change – or next year's doorstep.

So let us begin.

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