



Highway Needs, Climate Change, and Planned Growth: The Road Forward

Testimony of Gregory M. Cohen, P.E.
President and CEO
American Highway Users Alliance

Select Committee on Global Warming
U.S. House of Representatives
June 18, 2008

Chairman Markey, Ranking Member Sensenbrenner, and Members of the Committee, I am honored to have this opportunity to present testimony on the subject of highway needs, land use policies, and greenhouse gas emissions. Within the next year, we expect that the House will debate separate climate and surface transportation bills and that each bill may affect the other. As advocates for the freedom of personal mobility and a safe and efficient National Highway System, we greatly appreciate the opportunity to participate in this Committee's efforts to develop a hearing record that explores the nexus between transportation, land use policy, and climate change.

Organizational Background

Formed 75 years ago, the American Highway Users Alliance (The Highway Users) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization, which advocates for public policies that improve mobility and safety, to benefit the millions of American road users. We are an association that brings together the interests of users of all the highway modes, through a membership roster that includes AAA clubs, truckers, bus companies, motorcyclists, and recreational vehicle enthusiasts. These members and the hundreds of other member businesses and non-profit associations require safe, reliable, and efficient roads to facilitate the movement of their families, employees, customers, and products. Since 1932, The Highway Users has worked closely with Congress as a key stakeholder and grassroots advocate for improvements in highway legislation and for a strong and trustworthy Highway Trust Fund.

The Federal Government's Role in Transportation

In order to integrate climate change policy with transportation, it is important to understand the limited (but strong) federal role that should apply to transportation. At all levels of government, highway needs vastly outstrip the resources available to meet those needs. The Highway Users support strong federal involvement and we support an increase in highway user fees to address critical national highway needs. One primary transportation concern is the efficient movement of interstate commerce. The federal responsibility to regulate interstate commerce is enshrined in the Constitution. Freight traffic is expected to double over the next 20 years and highway capacity must be available to keep our economy moving. Other critical national priorities include combating the epidemic loss of life on our roads (43,000 dead per year), attacking economy-stifling congestion, and improving the poor condition and performance of major bridges and highways.

Cost-Effective Reduction of Greenhouse Gas Emissions

We are pleased to work with this Committee as it focuses on how to combat global warming. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recommends adopting a cost-effective approach by finding solutions that reduce emissions at a cost of \$50 or less per ton. The recent McKinsey study, *U.S. Greenhouse Emissions: How Much at What Cost*, notes that this can be accomplished while "maintaining comparable levels of consumer utility." This means, according to McKinsey, "no change in thermostat settings or appliance use, no downsizing of vehicles, home or commercial space and traveling the same mileage". In other words, "social engineering" is not necessary.

In this spirit and with constrained funds, we ask the Committee to require that cost-effectiveness measures be employed when choosing which carbon-reduction solutions you promote. Doing so would give taxpayers the greatest bang-for-the-buck and yield the biggest reductions in emissions. For highway users, it is absolutely critical that the Committee promote solutions based on the cost per ton of carbon removed. These policies would yield solutions that are effective and fair, rather than based upon ideology or special interest lobbying. Fixed and mobile source emission-reduction programs will have different associated costs and benefits and will likely occur at a different pace, depending upon the cost-effectiveness of each solution.

Highway Investments that Reduce Emissions: Congestion Relief

Among surface transportation modes, highway investments have a dominant role to play in reducing both wasted emissions and wasted fuel. This is because highway passenger and vehicle miles traveled outstrip rail travel by a factor of 99 to 1. Even dramatic increases in passenger rail use would have little or no effect on total highway travel. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, traffic congestion annually robs Americans of \$78 billion in wasted time and fuel. With each passing year that congestion isn't addressed, the costs and waste grow. Projects that reduce congestion also have the added benefit of saving fuel, reducing emissions, saving lives lost in car crashes, and improving the economy and quality-of-life. A 2004 Highway Users study, *Unclogging America's Arteries*, discusses the benefits of congestion relief projects that unplug the nation's worst bottlenecks. Over twenty years, these projects would reduce on-site carbon emissions by an average of 77%, save 40 billion gallons of fuel, reduce carbon emissions by 390 million tons, and cut carbon monoxide and volatile organic compound emissions in half. Although this study assumes that VMT would increase, carbon emissions would be dramatically reduced.

Unclogging America's Arteries demonstrates that vehicle-miles of travel (VMT) is not an accurate measure of greenhouse gas nor pollutant emissions. A better measure would be vehicle-time traveled (VTT), because idling in traffic congestion is a tremendous waste of carbon dioxide emissions and fuel. A national policy to reduce the time Americans waste in traffic congestion would be an extremely effective "win-win" solution that would help both people and the environment. We believe it would garner broad public support.

Not every traffic congestion relief project requires a major construction investment. Improving operations through traffic signal timing and intelligent transportation systems are perhaps the single most cost-effective way to reduce carbon emissions. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation, non-recurring events account for 50% of congestion-related delays. These include traffic incidents (25%), work zones (15%), bad weather (10%), and traffic signal problems (5%). Investments in real-time operations programs to clean up non-recurring incidents are vital to reduce this type of congestion and associated emissions and wasted fuel.

"Smart Growth" and Transportation

Smart growth means different things to different people. In general, the term was coined to promote planning practices that favor re-development of already developed land and strategically directed new developments that prioritize infrastructure investments within growth areas. Many "smart growth" developments (i.e. Kentlands in Gaithersburg, MD) fully accept highway travel as the dominant form of transportation, while others attempt to develop plans that discourage automobile use and driving. In general, "densification" of urban and suburban areas is a common element of "smart growth" plans. Less dense suburban development is derided as "sprawl". At a recent Senate briefing, a leading "smart growth" advocate described the irony that public opinion is solidly opposed to both "sprawl" and "densification". To maximize public support, he advised activists to talk about combating "sprawl" but avoid discussions about increasing neighborhood densities.

Federal Government's Role in Land Use Planning

The federal government defers land-use planning and zoning decisions to local governments, yet some have proposed that the United States should make “smart growth” a national land-use policy. Recently, this national planning concept has been injected into the debate on global warming. Some activists believe that the federal government should take a greater role in directing people where to live and how to travel, and particularly how to commute to work. Yet according to research from IAC Transportation, emissions from commuters in cars and light trucks represent only 5.2% of the total U.S. carbon emissions. A massively-expensive investment in rail transit and bike paths would only be able to reduce emissions by a tiny fraction of a percent, because research by *Commuting In America* author Alan Pisarski has shown that under any modal-shift scenario with densities less than 10,000 people per square mile (i.e. Manhattan), cars remain the dominant form of transportation. It is important to note that the vast majority of trips are not commutes. With few exceptions, non-highway modes are far less likely to gain enough market share to be cost effective for most shopping, social, and family trips.

For extreme proponents of nationalized “smart growth”, denial of federal funding of State surface transportation programs is considered an appropriate lever of enforcing their will upon state and local planners. Some have gone so far as to suggest that EPA should take over DOT's role in approving State and metropolitan transportation plans, to ensure that plans promote “smart growth” concepts and reduce VMT. Such a plan could threaten federally-funded highway projects that are needed to address serious problems such as freight mobility, obsolete and structurally deficient bridges, aging pavements, snarling congestion, and most importantly, safety improvements. We ask that this Committee firmly reject these proposals.

Claims that rising travel will overwhelm air quality progress are older than the Clean Air Act of 1970. Yet year-after-year, regulated pollution has dropped even as VMT has risen. The same will be true for greenhouse gases as carbon reducing technology in fuels and vehicles improve. Attempting to force VMT reductions through onerous “smart growth” plans that actually increase road congestion is neither a cost-effective approach nor people-friendly. In many cases, it is likely to actually increase emissions by increasing total vehicle time traveled (VTT). For example, “smart growth” advocates have found that doubling an area's density would decrease per-capita VMT by 20%. If twice as many people are driving 80% of their original VMT in the same area, this equals 60% more local traffic! Some have even proposed developing land-use plans designed to reduce per-capita VMT by 50%! Creating the congested traffic conditions necessary to achieve this goal would sharply increase emergency medical service response times, make shipping logistics expensive and unreliable, and increase road rage. Amazingly, some “smart growth” advocates even claim that “congestion is our friend” because misery on the road might convince a few people to stop driving and increase demand for alternate modes. .

Recent research on “smart growth” by internationally-renown demographer Wendell Cox finds that housing becomes less affordable when restrictive land use regulations such as “smart growth” are employed. Also Welfare-to-Work research from the DLC's Progressive Policy Institute in 1999 found that “the shortest distance between a poor person and a job is along a line driven in a car.” Cox's research has also found that high-density high-rise apartment buildings preferred by “smart growth” advocates generate far more greenhouse gas emissions per capita than low-rise townhomes or single family homes.

In summary, we implore this Committee to fully consider the unintended, negative consequences of a national land use planning scheme and reject it. Individual States and metropolitan planning organizations should continue to decide for themselves if they wish to incorporate these concepts into their local land use planning. On a case-by-case basis, some of the plans may have merit.

Solutions That Are More Promising

Beyond congestion relief projects, the great opportunity for mobile source reductions relies in fuels and vehicle technology. Even if VMT could be reduced dramatically, would it still be necessary in a future of low or zero-emission vehicles? Recent research suggests that hybrid vehicles will soon yield lower per-capita greenhouse gas emissions than transit buses and trains.

With the new national CAFE standards and new congressionally-authorized tax incentives, these solutions would allow for increased mobility and all of the economic and quality-of-life benefits that travel brings. Like congestion relief, new technologies can be a “win-win” for both people and the environment. Instead of trying to socially-engineer behaviors, we will create technologies that allow people the freedom to travel and live wherever and whenever they wish. Allowing that freedom, rather than restricting it, preserves the American dream of opportunity and prosperity.

Legislative Proposals

If the Committee pursues greenhouse gas legislation, we ask that you do not discriminate against highway programs and mobility, as funds become available to reduce emissions. After all, highway users will be paying the increased fuel costs inevitable under a cap-and-trade program, carbon tax, or fuel tax.

We prefer a carbon or fuel tax paid by highway users at the pump that is deposited into the Highway Trust Fund and used for any Title 23 (Highways) or Title 49 (Transportation) project that reduces carbon emissions at a cost of less than \$50 per ton removed.

Some have proposed a cap-and-trade proposal that would increase fossil fuel costs paid by highway users, in which credits would be made available only to transit, bike paths, and social engineering projects (such as VMT reduction plans). We are not aware of any data analysis that grounds this proposal. It appears to simply be a diversion of highway user funds to special interests. Reality, rather than rhetoric, should be the basis for action.

Conclusion

America’s highway users are ready to help reduce greenhouse emissions and prevent wasted fuel. We stand particularly ready to support congressional action to reduce traffic congestion and invest in fuel and vehicle technology. We believe this approach provides a tremendous opportunity to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions and save fuel. This approach is also one of the few direct actions that Congress can take to reduce energy use that provides enormous benefits to drivers, consumers, and the economy. We urge the Committee to stand united by choosing this “win-win” approach. Other approaches need to be considered carefully but we ask that you reject unrealistic and punitive suggestions that seek to regulate where people live and how they should travel. Highway users should not be punished for driving and their increased highway user fees and/or cap-and-trade debits should not be diverted from desperately needed highway projects. As every Member of the Committee knows, highway needs are overwhelming and resolving them is critical to our nation’s prosperity.

Below, we have attached some information that may be helpful in understanding public opinion and key facts about surface transportation.

Some Helpful Survey Information

A recent national survey (April 4-6, 2008) of 1000 likely voters indicated the following:

- 76% see cars, roads, and bridges as a benefit to society
- 69% say congestion relief is a better green policy policies aimed to reduce driving
- 80% feel highway and bridge safety needs to be improved
- 88% feel congestion relief is needed
- 74% say invest more in highways and bridges next year
- 93% say it’s important the fuel taxes are dedicated to highways and bridges

Fast Facts about Ground Transportation in the U.S.

From 1980 to 2004, road capacity has increased by 4%, lane capacity by 6%, but highway vehicle miles traveled has increased by about 94%, and highway passenger miles traveled has increased by about 81%! No wonder there is congestion, wasted fuel, and excessive greenhouse gas emissions!

Transportation Trends and Regulated Emissions 1980-2006

| | |
|-------------------------|-------|
| GDP | +119% |
| Miles Traveled (VMT) | +97% |
| Vehicles | +56% |
| Transportation Energy | +46% |
| Drivers | +40% |
| Population | +32% |
| New Highway Lanes | +6% |
| New Roads | +4% |
| Particulate Matter - 10 | -28% |
| NOx | -33% |
| CO | -50% |
| SO2 | -47% |
| VOCs | -52% |
| Lead | -97% |

In 2004, highway vehicles account for 99% of vehicle miles traveled & passenger miles traveled. Despite tremendous investment in non-highway alternatives, these investments represent a very small opportunity to reduce congestion, emissions, and wasted fuel.

| Vehicle Miles Traveled (Millions) | | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2004 prel. |
| Cars | 1,111,596 | 1,408,266 | 1,600,287 | 1,704,982 |
| Light Trucks/SUVs | 290,935 | 574,571 | 923,059 | 1,014,342 |
| Trucks | 108,581 | 146,242 | 205,520 | 226,505 |
| Freight Rail | 29,277 | 26,159 | 34,590 | 37,071 |
| Motorcycles | 10,214 | 9,557 | 10,469 | 10,048 |
| Buses | 6,059 | 5,726 | 7,590 | 6,637 |
| Rail transit | 403 | 561 | 648 | 710 |
| Commuter Rail | 179 | 213 | 271 | 295 |
| Intercity Rail | 235 | 301 | 368 | 308 |
| Other transit | 15 | 324 | 833 | 986 |

| Passenger Miles Traveled (Millions) | | | | |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2004 prel. |
| Cars | 2,011,989 | 2,281,391 | 2,544,457 | 2,693,872 |
| Light Trucks/SUVs | 520,774 | 999,754 | 1,467,664 | 1,758,542 |
| Buses | | 121,398 | 160,919 | 140,716 |
| Rail transit | 10,939 | 12,046 | 15,200 | 15,930 |
| Motorcycles | 12,257 | 12,424 | 11,516 | 12,761 |
| Commuter Rail | 6,516 | 7,082 | 9,402 | 9,719 |
| Intercity Rail | 4,503 | 6,057 | 5,498 | 5,511 |
| Other transit | 390 | 841 | 1,631 | 1,874 |

| Roadway Extent (Miles) | | | | |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| | 1980 | 1990 | 2000 | 2004 |
| Public Road Length | 3,859,837 | 3,866,926 | 3,950,035 | 3,995,490 |
| Lane-Miles | 7,922,174 | 8,051,081 | 8,255,521 | 8,372,283 |