

USDOT/AARP/MIT Remarks to WHCOA
***“What Governments Can Do Now to Promote
Greater Transportation Options for an Aging Society”***

Boston, MA

April 14, 2005

I am pleased to be here this afternoon.

I want to express my appreciation to AARP, MIT Age Lab and U.S. DOT for convening this White House Conference on Aging designated event.

There is much to talk about so let me get started.

First, let me note some broad challenges before us in promoting greater transportation options for an aging society –

- We know that governments – at every level – are challenged to simply maintain our existing transportation facilities and operations.
- Compounding this problem, State transportation spending has declined in recent years – state spending in 2004 was actually about 10 percent lower than 2002 – making it harder to fund other options. A number of states have shifted funds from transportation to meet other needs.
- The public and our elected officials often look with disfavor on tax increases so we have to get smarter in how we use resources.
- The move to private financing could weaken planning and public engagement.
- We need to remind ourselves that there is more going on than transportation – challenged on prescription drugs, health care, housing affordability, etc.

This is a tough environment that we find ourselves in, but it is where the opportunities lie.

There is a convergence of issues that could make the next five years a productive period for advancing the objectives that we have set forth for this conference.

We know that *gas prices* are reminding people that travel options matter.

We know that the *private markets* are placing a premium on housing and communities that have location efficiencies, meaning proximity to a broader mix of travel options.

We know that *many states and localities have to raise new revenues* to sustain their transportation programs, and the *public favors more transportation options*.

And, we know that *some states are considering other tax sources – i.e. general taxpayers – and moving away from user fees for future revenues* so it will be harder for them to claim that state transportation investments should only serve automobile users.

And, finally, we know that the *new law will provide a brief window of opportunity* where the states and MPOs can step back and consider some mid-course corrections before going forward.

By bringing forward better ideas, we can get decision makers to begin shifting today's priorities to meeting tomorrow's needs – we just need to show them how to meet the challenges of an aging society.

I believe our panel topic – Livable Communities and Personal Choice – is the right frame for what we need to accomplish.

First, of all the biggest opportunities today are at the local level.

Earlier this week, I was in Charlotte – with Bill Millar and advocates for more transit which also means more walkable communities – for a conference sponsored by the Center for Transportation Excellence. People, most transit and community leaders from all across the country, gathered to learn how to engage voters on local referenda – the very measures that are becoming the vehicles for financing the travel choices we are espousing.

It made me optimistic about the future. Because when people get to choose the product mix, we find a lot more funding for choices and livable communities, for transit and for safe walkable neighborhoods.

The sessions were grounded in what we are seeing across the country – that locally-oriented initiatives are now the venue for making progress on travel options.

As governors and state legislatures struggle to find consensus on how to fund state transportation programs, more and more local areas are moving forward.

In community after community, local leaders are speaking more broadly to their transportation needs – and the transportation challenges of an aging society are part of the debate. Guess what - the voters are receptive.

At the state level, the emphasis continues to be more on relieving bottlenecks in the highway network than refining the product line to meet tomorrow's changing needs. We find a lot of money going into big ticket highway projects which are seen as the "silver bullet", crowding out funds for other travel options.

The momentum in the system is focused on projects. The need for new resources is obvious to many. The problem is that few have figured out but how to make the sale. So the path being pursued is to borrow funds at record levels, tying up future resources with debt service payments and putting off the investments that will address tomorrow's needs. This is not acceptable.

While there are emerging signs of change, most state transportation leaders are not ready to accept the paradigm shift that is upon them. I am somewhat sympathetic, having been in their shoes. The pressures to address today's problem with yesterday's answers are enormous.

They believe their traditional product line is what people want, and they don't understand why the public is not supporting them.

Perhaps, it is a product problem. It's time to stop pursuing a 20th century answer for a 21st century challenge. Several states are riding to the challenge – New Jersey and PA come to mind – and are rethinking the way they approach addressing today's challenges.

Looking at the successful efforts at the local level would send a strong message – providing travel choices gets votes and money.

We see –

- Officials embracing these challenges – by committing funds to walking and bicycling and paratransit or by upgrading and adding to current services, with rapid bus, light rail, trolley, and commuter rail services. Charlotte, Houston, Phoenix, Denver, Salt Lake City are places where the idea of transit and walkable communities would have been unthinkable not so long ago.
- Local initiatives are reserving portions of new tax revenues for specific program needs, such as improving transportation services for older Americans

So, what can be done by advocacy organizations and through government actions?

Raise the Visibility of the Challenges that Lie Ahead

We are seeing more organizations focusing on aspects of the access challenges facing us as our population grows older.

AARP has been engaged in a broad “livable communities” program – prompting more public debate on how we can develop smarter and give the public more choice.

The American Society of Landscape Architects, the American Planning Association and others are doing their part – furthering the national dialogue on:

- how we design places,
- how we plan for mobility, and
- how we reengineer our communities to make them more livable and richer in travel options.

The American Planning Association is promoting safe growth and smart development, which was discussed extensively at their recent annual meeting.

Last year, the Eno Foundation held a special symposium on aging and mobility, not the typical forum for these issues.

The STPP coalition, which includes both AARP and APTA, has stepped up its efforts.

Our **Aging Americans: Stranded Without Options** report challenged our public leaders to focus on these questions.

Our **Mean Streets** report documents how we have lost track of the most basic of travel options: the pedestrian trip.

All of us see the White House Conference this fall as the national forum to help further elevate the debate and get constituencies engaged in finding new approaches to address access in an aging society.

Seize Opportunities Before Us

– Renewal of the Federal Transportation Law

Congress is now working on a new multi-year transportation law – more than \$280 billion will be provided to state and local governments. Hopefully, there will be opportunities in this new law that will give us the option to invest in walkable communities, to shift resources to more effective options, and to improve safety, especially for pedestrians.

This law will exert considerable influence over the transportation investment priorities of states and local areas for the remainder of this decade.

It will include some initiatives that will accelerate the reengineering of our transportation systems –

- A **Safe Routes to Schools** program will be enacted – helping states and local areas satisfy some of the public’s demand to make walking and bicycling safer for our children.

Suggestion – let’s brand safety initiatives for walking and bicycling building on the success of Safe Routes to School and create opportunities for **Safe Routes for Seniors** or **Safe Routes to Transit**, moving us closer to the types of communities and travel choices that are needed.

- Transit investment is absolutely crucial to our agenda, keeping **the amount of dollars committed to transit at an acceptable level is a challenge**. Since TEA-21 expired, transit has received only 21/2 cents for every additional dollar for highways.

The funding levels determine the timing of new transit investments and the pace of repairs to existing capacities. Transit has proven to be so popular in Salt Lake City that they are moving to bring service to new corridors in 10 years rather than 30 years.

We are likely to see a **shift of transit dollars to smaller areas that don't have the level of service we find in our major metro areas** – remarkably, today, 40 percent of the nation's counties have no transit services.

- We hope that there will be a greater commitment to building the capacity in our **Metropolitan Planning Organizations** or MPOs.

These agencies – serving 4 out of every 5 Americans – need enhanced support and resources so they can help plan and organize the public debate on transportation options for an aging society. “Aging in place” in our auto-centric suburbs is a very big challenge that we need to get started on.

- The **“flexibility” features** of past laws will be continued, allowing states and local officials to invest these funds in ways that meet their needs, although a smaller percent of the total program funding may fall under this flexibility.
- There will be a continued commitment to **senior transportation needs under the Section 5310 program**, and efforts to incorporate the President's “New Freedom Initiative.”
- Finally, we continue to press for provisions on **“Complete Streets”** in the legislation. This is about making sure that federally-assisted projects consider all users, not just drivers. Get it right the first time needs to be our motto.
- These provisions and others in the bill, create the financial and policy framework that will guide a big slug of state and local capital investment over the remainder of this decade.

– Implementation Phase of this New Federal Law Presents Opportunities to Advance the Issues of Choice and Livability

The renewal of the federal law will shift our focus to implementation.

All of us should engage the new law and use it as a “springboard” to greater governmental action on the transportation needs of an aging population. By any measure, this is a massive amount of money, even if it is not what we would have liked to see. There will be opportunities and we can’t let opportunity slip by.

Everyone has a role to play –

- US DOT and its various activities, MIT Age Lab in furthering the research and academic underpinnings for action on these issues; and,
- AARP, APTA along with other advocacy organizations must keep these issues before decision-makers and the public.

Undeniably, there is a need for stronger federal role and presence on these issues.

I think we would agree that the US DOT and other federal agencies are not fully engaged at this point; there is a lot more room for leadership, collaboration and a greater sense of urgency to address the needs of changing demographics.

- Current efforts are important – at the Federal Transit Administration with the Sec. 5310 program to the states, NTSA’s work on driver safety, Federal Highway’s efforts on signage and road design, USDOT’s research products, and a renewed commitment to cooperation between the Department of Health and Human Services and USDOT on coordinating on human service transportation.
- The White House Conference creates a real opportunity to get federal transportation officials engaged on these issues, with an agenda to motivate the broader transportation community and transportation practitioners in particular to take up this challenge.

At the state and local level, let me speak to one area where action is needed – it is to strengthen the planning processes at the state and metropolitan levels.

- There is nothing in federal law, there is nothing in current review processes of state and local planning effort, and there is nothing in the current technical assistance or other functions at

the USDOT – that address the issues of providing access for an aging population.

- Long range transportation plans have to address in meaningful ways the issues of an aging population. Lip service simply won't get the job done.
- Priorities have to change to produce a different mix of projects so we can assure ourselves that we are doing everything possible to meet the changing needs of our stakeholders. The answer that there isn't any money and you will have to wait simply isn't good enough.
- Our programs have to reflect the different needs for tomorrow by focusing on outcomes not VMT or gas consumed. Today we have a mix of function system programs (IM, NHS), and, with the exception of the CMAQ program (reducing auto emissions), nothing really focuses on outcomes like the issues we are discussing here.

If we really want to deliver on livable communities and personal choice in an aging society – we must go beyond simply the mechanics (i.e. putting the plan together and conducting the public processes) to making it happen (i.e. committing real dollars to real projects that are part of a systematic effort to deliver more choices).

To be sure, there are localized examples of where choices are being promoted – certain neighborhoods, corridors or jurisdictions within regions.

Using our transportation system as the lever to achieve livable communities requires partnerships. At the local level, you can't get there by yourself.

Land-use decisions are as important as transportation decisions in ensuring that our older citizens stay connected to their families, their community and the services they need to support them.

Money is important. Partnerships between local, state and the federal government are needed. But so is a program that will appeal to the stakeholders who actually own the facilities – citizens like you and me. Absent a program that addresses the variety of users it is unlikely that the funding will be available to reach out goals.

Framing the future of transportation in ways that addresses the needs of everyday people in meaningful ways is critical. Establishing relevant goals that relate to the reality of everyday lives offers a way to refocus the debate about the future of transportation policies and investment strategies that could expand the support for increased transportation funding and shifting the investment focus. The demographic shift that we know will happen offers just such an opportunity.

Summary

Recommendations for Livable Communities and Personal Choices

1. **Strengthen transportation planning** to include all modes, users, trip types –
 - Link transportation and land-use planning to create greater options and stronger communities;
 - Incorporate aging issues into transportation planning; and
 - Move from a focus on projects to a focus on community/systems/services.

2. **Shift transportation priorities** over time –
 - Establish clear goals for addressing all users, trip types;
 - Move to the creation of walkable communities – use transportation investments to leverage walkable development patterns with transit services; and
 - Use the tools – long range transportation plan, priority-setting, refocus current programs, embrace new opportunities like Safe Routes to School (Safe Routes for Seniors, Safe Routes to Transit), equitable funding for transit and other auto-alternatives, E/H program, flexibility of funds, complete streets, new funding at the local level to offer much greater choice for users.

3. Find **champions** who can provide the leadership needed to give the issues of a diverse transportation greater visibility –
 - Raising the profile of issues is critical to getting elected officials to pay attention;
 - Insist that there be more leadership at the Federal level to raise the visibility of these concerns; and
 - Frame new direction around demographic shift taking place.
4. **Engage shareholders** – the owners of the public rights-of-way to advocate for new priorities and greater diversity in our transportation menu –
 - Advocates are the change agents in today’s world of overloaded agendas;
 - They must be organized, know what they want, and have the facts and figures to advocate for their cause; and
 - Build a bigger tent to get support for new resources.

There is a lot to do and I thank you for the opportunity to share some of my ideas.