

Senator Michael Bennet
Opening Statement
Senate Banking Committee Hearing
“Sustainable Transportation Solutions: Investing in Transit
to Meet 21st Century Challenges”
March 12, 2009

Thank you, Chairman Dodd and Ranking Member Shelby for holding this hearing and for inviting Mayor Hickenlooper to be with us today. As I said in my introduction, I can think of no one better to help guide this committee through our discussion on the reauthorization of federal transit programs than John.

As John said in his testimony, there are exciting things going on in Denver when it comes to transit. The FasTracks project, which marks the largest rail expansion in the country, is a model for cooperation at the local and federal level can make reliable, safe public transportation a reality. By the time the project is completed in 2017, the Denver area will have six new commuter rail and light rail corridors, three extensions of existing corridors, 18 miles of Bus Rapid Transit, 21,000 new parking spaces, and a redeveloped Denver Union Station.

As the Secretary mentioned in his testimony, we find ourselves at a crossroads at this time of economic downturn—a crossroads at which we must choose a path that creates jobs and moves us to a cleaner, greener future. My state just received over \$100 million in stimulus funding for transit projects, and I thank the Secretary for holding up his end of the bargain by putting this money into the community so quickly. I know that Colorado will put it to good use.

Having said that, I know my state and many others continue to face funding challenges when it comes to transit funding. Many transit systems, like Denver’s Regional Transportation District (RTD), are funded through sales taxes. In this time of economic distress, as families cut back and tighten their purse strings, this source of revenue has not provided our transit systems with the funding they need to meet the challenges associated with the increased ridership that has been a direct result of that very economic downturn.

Local leaders are making tough choices in order to help meet those needs. In doing so, they are showing their commitment to public transit. I hope that we can produce a bill in this committee that shows that our commitment to helping local transportation entities more adequately meet those needs is just as strong.

At the same time, I am interested to know how we can increase the private sector’s role in creating our transit future. The Denver metro transit system is participating in an FTA pilot program called the Private Partnership Pilot Program (Penta-P) that has the potential

to transform the way we develop, finance, and maintain transit systems. I am closely following the project in Colorado and will be keeping this model in mind as the committee works on the reauthorization bill.

Finally, I want to touch on the significance this bill has on transit in rural areas. While urban areas understandably receive the bulk of federal transit dollars, I want to make sure that we do not forget our rural communities during this reauthorization process. An increasing number of seniors and people with disabilities rely on public transportation in the rural parts of Colorado, and while their transit options look quite a bit different from those in the more urban areas, it is no less important for them to reap the benefits of a new and improved transit future.

My time has expired, and I thank the Chairman, Ranking Member, and our witnesses.