

REMARKS FROM
MS. ALISON ZELMS, CITY OF ROCHESTER

Madam Chair, My name is Alison Zelms (Z-E-L-M-S), City Administrator for the City of Rochester. We are located a little over an hour south of the twin cities metro area and our community has approximately 119,000 residents and over 3 million visitors each year for our world renowned medical care from the Mayo Clinic.

I'd like to begin by expressing our gratitude for several recent Congressional actions.

The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) have been critically important sources of emergency transit funding. Ridership on Rochester Public Transit regular routes fell 90% in the early days of the pandemic; today we are still 65% below 2019 levels.

The emergency operations funding allowed us keep our current bus routes throughout the city running and to implement extensive cleaning and other safety measures to keep operators and passengers safe. CARES capital funding (with no local match required) allowed us to purchase 10 replacement buses without tapping depleted reserves to come up with the local dollars.

Without CARES and ARPA we would not have been able to safely operate our essential service for the many essential workers we have in Rochester.

We appreciate the consideration by Congress for President Biden's and US Department of Transportation 2022 budget. Investment in infrastructure supports resiliency when it is needed most in our communities. This investment allows for transit programs that create and increase equitable access to opportunity. It includes \$56.1 million for Rochester's Bus Rapid Transit project which was included in the US Department of Transportation FY22 Budget.

Rochester's bus rapid transit project, known as The Link, is a transformational public transit project currently in the design phase, and has applied for funding from the Federal Transit Administration's Capital Investment Grant's Small Starts program.

This high-amenity, high-frequency downtown transit service is part of a comprehensive mobility strategy. Local funding through our Destination Medical Center, the largest public-private

economic initiative in Minnesota and the catalyst for growth in Rochester, will further the goal of creating a global destination for health and wellness.

This once-in-a-generation project will have a broad impact in our community, advancing important foundational principles and strategic priorities, which include the following areas:

Environmental Sustainability. The Link will move people more efficiently and reduce vehicle miles traveled in our community; Reduce future environmental and livability problems associated with traffic congestion; and the electric powered fleet will reduce our city's environmental footprint and help the city transition away from fossil fuels.

Economic Health. The Link will help reduce downtown parking demand, allowing for higher and better land-use in the downtown core; will encourage investment in high-density, affordable, mixed-use development along transit corridors; and will be a signature amenity in Rochester for residents and visitor by providing a superior customer transit experience.

Social Equity. The Link provides access to employment and other opportunities for populations who need it most--we know that economic and social mobility is strongly correlated with physical mobility; and will have a long-term halo effect, strengthening the overall Rochester Public Transit system providing the opportunity to improve service to transit-dependent populations.

In addition to this major effort, the City of Rochester sees additional challenges and opportunities perhaps more unique to a transit system outside of the metro area that we wanted to share:

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to have a significant adverse effect on transit ridership. While the principles that shape our mobility strategy remain in place, a high degree of uncertainty exists, such as the following questions:

When will the public health crisis subside and the associated operational restrictions and guidance from federal, state and local authorities be eased?

When will people feel comfortable returning to public transit, from a personal risk perspective? How will the recent proliferation of remote work affect the rate of growth in transit demand?

We are confident that demand will return and grow. However, we anticipate the rate of growth may need to be re-evaluated.

The COVID-19 pandemic has sped the rate of change and encouraged innovation, leading to an opportunity to reconsider and improve many aspects of transit service delivery. For example, the need to disinfect the on-board environment means new cleaning protocols and filtration technologies that will lead to improved customer comfort.

Touchless mobile fare payment technology is being implemented in Rochester—long-planned, but of increased importance now. Vehicle technology continues to advance, such as improvements in range and performance of battery electric vehicles and on-street pilot testing of autonomous transit vehicles. In fact, the Minnesota Department of Transportation and First Transit, Rochester Public Transit's contracted operator, have a year-long autonomous shuttle pilot operating on the streets in Rochester—expected to carry passengers starting this fall.

I ask the members of this committee to support continued federal resources for local transit agencies that will help us emerge healthy and build our infrastructure for the future. With no clear end to the impacts of COVID-19 in sight, operation support will continue to be needed to guarantee we are able to provide essential services to the most vulnerable populations.

Federal capital programs like those in Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES) and American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) as well as ongoing transportation-specific programs such as the Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) program are essential to implement sustainable equitable mobility available to everyone that encompasses congestion management, social equity, affordable housing, economic development and climate action.

Thank you again for this opportunity and your time.