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With Inflation, Maintenance Needs Soar Witnesses Say

AASHTO President Pete Rahn, Director of the Missouri Department of Transportation, and Vice-President Allen Biehler, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, on Thursday outlined at a House subcommittee hearing the immense needs state transportation departments face in maintaining their highway and transit systems, particularly in light of increased fuel and construction costs.

Addressing members of the Highway and Transit Subcommittee of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Rahn said, “We have grossly under funded both our state and federal transportation systems over the last three decades. If we continue this downward spiral, we risk losing our status as a global leader, as well as precious lives.”

Rahn noted that:

- China invested \$363 billion on highways alone in the last year;
- India, according to a recent *USA Today* article, has tripled their infrastructure spending to \$500 billion a year; and,
- The U.S., at all government levels, spends annually \$87 billion on highways and transit capital a year.

Rahn said that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce has said that the U.S. needs to invest an additional \$50 billion a year in our highway and public transportation systems just to maintain their current performance and more than \$100 billion annually to improve their performance.

He added, “To put it simply, we must pony up now to remain globally competitive or we will end up with a second-rate transportation system and a much less mobile society than we have today.”

Biehler said that “managing the transportation network to keep America moving means weighing difficult choices among satisfying enormous expectations, coping with the sobering reality of the size and age of the network and dealing with very limited resources.” He noted, for example, that his state has the third largest number of state-maintained bridges, some 25,327, of which 24 percent are structurally deficient, twice the national average. He said that bridge spending has tripled since Gov. Edward Rendell (D-PA) took office in 2003,

at the same time the state has adopted a new risk assessment program to ensure repairs are targeted to the bridges with the greatest need.

But Biehler added that the annual 12.5 percent increase in construction costs over the past five years shows no signs of stopping, and that the price of structural steel has increased by nearly 50 percent, and asphalt by 25 percent.

Biehler described the state's efforts to expand transportation funding resources, including a bonding initiative, possible leasing of the Pennsylvania Turnpike and consideration of tolling for Interstate 80.

Biehler noted that with gas prices rising, transit ridership in the state is reaching record levels, and appears likely to continue increasing. The transit system faces tremendous capital needs, he said. "We are struggling to have enough money to hold together what we have, let alone be able to think about the level of investment that would be needed to provide people with a robust, cost-affordable, frequent and reliable transit system across the Commonwealth that could reduce the need for the automobile, decrease energy usage and improve our track on global warming."

Other panelists, including Stephen Schlickman of the Chicago Regional Transit Authority and Michael Allegra of the Utah Transit Authority, also addressed transit capital and operating needs, noting that deferring maintenance ultimately increases operating costs resulting in either fare increases or service cuts. Local governments are equally hard-pressed to meet maintenance needs in the face of inflation, according to Leo Bowman, County Commissioner from Prosser, WA.

The testimony of Rahn and Biehler is available at the AASHTO website, <http://www.transportation.org>.