Early Support for Clean, Efficient Transportation

Nearly two decades ago, Congress enacted the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). This landmark bill rightly gave more funding and power to regions to fund transit options other than just highways, such as light rail, that would improve air quality and save energy. And while this law promoted more transit lines and bike paths—and even improved the compatibility between plans for clean air and plans for transportation—it did not do enough. For example, while a large new “Surface Transportation Program” was set up such that funding could be “flexed” to purposes besides highway-building, just 13 percent of available funds were directed toward building mass transit between 1991 and 2006, with most states opting not to take advantage of this opportunity.

Providing Transportation Options for the 21st Century

With the current law set to expire in September 2009, Congress will have the opportunity to pass legislation that will usher in a new set of public
transit systems and to connect our cities with rail lines as well as highways. Such legislation should include the necessary support, including major financial investment, for the deployment of available, cutting-edge technologies. In addition, the new law should support the next generation of transportation solutions here in America, including transit-oriented development and infrastructure with built-in bicycle and pedestrian access. In short, the time has come to move beyond the era of needlessly long commutes, unhealthy air, dangerous global warming, and skyrocketing fuel prices by making a massive investment in a balanced set of low-carbon transportation options.

Steps to a Cleaner, Greener, and Safer Transportation Future

As a founding member of Transportation for America—a growing coalition of developers, housing advocates, transportation experts, and conservation groups that is tired of business as usual—NRDC is focused on building the high-performance and highly efficient transportation system. Together we must adopt policies to:

1. **Build to compete.** From rails, to buses, to bikes, America must retake the lead when it comes to transportation ingenuity and innovation.

2. **Invest for a clean, green recovery.** There are rail and rapid bus projects in 78 metro areas across the country waiting and ready to go; investing in them can create almost 7 million good jobs.

3. **Fix what’s broken.** A thorough infrastructure restoration program could generate nearly 15 million good jobs and provide opportunities for expanding mass transit.

4. **Stop wasteful spending.** State transportation departments in states such as Pennsylvania and Tennessee have taken the necessary step of scrapping ill-conceived road projects in recent years, saving taxpayer dollars that could be better used for forward-looking transportation projects.

5. **Save Americans money.** Building more public transportation will provide the option to skip costly trips to the gas station in favor of hopping on convenient commuter buses and trains. Further, public transportation already saves us 1.4 billion gallons of gasoline each year—the equivalent of 34 Middle Eastern supertankers.

More investment in public transportation will put money back into the American economy rather than into the coffers of unfriendly suppliers of oil.