As deadline looms, counties urge congressional action on transportation

NACo releases transportation advocacy video

WASHINGTON, D.C. – With federal transportation funding set to expire at the end of May, county leaders – who own and maintain the largest share of America's road miles – urged federal lawmakers to act swiftly.

As part of the third annual Infrastructure Week, National Association of Counties (NACo) officials gathered today at the National Press Club to call on Congress to ensure continued solvency of the Highway Trust Fund and to pass a multi-year reauthorization of the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act, or MAP-21.

“As the owners, investors and managers of a significant portion of the nation’s transportation infrastructure, counties know firsthand the cost of underinvestment and inaction at the federal level,” said NACo President Riki Hokama, council member, Maui County, Hawaii. “Investing in a 21st century infrastructure is important to counties and residents nationwide. Transportation infrastructure is an essential part of our lives. It is central to everything from economic competitiveness to food security and a strong national defense.”

As part of its advocacy efforts on Capitol Hill, NACo debuted a short video — entitled “Let’s Drive America Forward” — describing why federal transportation policies matter to counties and their residents.

“The nation’s transportation infrastructure is at a critical intersection,” the video states. “Unless Congress acts, federal funding for highways and transit systems will run out. And counties and our residents will be left flat. Counties simply can’t afford for Congress to wait.”

County leaders representing NACo’s Large Urban County Caucus (LUCC) and its Rural Action Caucus (RAC) united under a single message to Congress: Counties need a reliable federal partner and long-term transportation certainty. Federal inaction and short-term patches create uncertainty at the local level, hindering major transportation improvements.

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“No great nation has ever succeeded by building its infrastructure six months at a time, and the United States won’t either,” said Hennepin County, Minn. Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, NACo’s Transportation Steering Committee chair. “Counties need a reliable federal partner in strengthening the nation’s transportation infrastructure. Federal inaction leaves counties stuck in traffic.”

“Counties call on Congress to fix the Highway Trust Fund and reauthorize a six-year surface transportation bill that directs more funding to locally-owned infrastructure,” said Tarrant County, Texas Commissioner Roy C. Brooks, LUCC’s chair. "Counties are doing our part, and we need Congress to take action now.”

“Particularly for rural counties, roads and bridges represent a lifeline to our communities,” continued Maui County Council Member Michael Victorino, RAC’s chair. “Transportation systems move agricultural products from farms to tables and connect rural communities with the urban ones.”

During their remarks, officials noted several points, including:

• Counties own and maintain 45 percent of the nation’s road miles (compared to 32 percent of public roads owned by cities and townships; 19 percent owned by states; and 3 percent owned by the federal government).
• Counties own four out of every 10 bridges nationwide.
• Counties play a key role in one-third of the nation’s airports and mass transit systems.
• Under MAP-21, federal funding for locally-owned highways and bridges decreased by 30 percent.

Later in the day, Hokama participated in a Capitol Hill briefing with leaders from national organizations that represent state and local officials. He underscored the importance of preserving the tax-exempt status of municipal bonds, an important low-cost financing tool for infrastructure projects.

“In addition to local, state and federal funding, counties utilize municipal bonds to deliver critical transportation infrastructure projects,” Hokama said. “Any change to the tax-exemption for municipal bonds, which has been in place since the first written tax code in 1913, would result in increased costs to counties, costs that would ultimately be shifted to local taxpayers and result in decreased infrastructure investment.”

From 2003-2013, county, state and other local investment in infrastructure amounted to approximately $4.2 trillion through long-term tax-exempt municipal bonds, a significant amount when compared to the $1.43 trillion provided by the federal government.

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The National Association of Counties (NACo) is the only national organization that represents county governments in the United States. Founded in 1935, NACo assists America’s 3,069 counties in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient counties. NACo promotes sound public policies, fosters county solutions and innovation, promotes intergovernmental and public-private collaboration and provides value-added services to save counties and taxpayers money. More information at: www.naco.org.