

Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Member Day

Congressmember Karen Bass

Wednesday, April 14, 2021

Chair DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, and members of the House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure, thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Our nation's transportation system is in desperate need of investment -- and especially, equitable investment that elevates communities of color and minority- and women-owned businesses. For decades, access to federal highway and transit funding has benefited too few. Now, more than ever, on the tail end of a pandemic that has devastated communities but especially those of African-Americans and Latinos, who make up the heart of essential workers, we need to take bold action to equitably rebuild our nation's infrastructure. That means prioritizing the concerns of communities long burdened by historically unjust transportation policy.

First, I'd like to call your attention to the "Build Local, Hire Local Act," which I introduced in the 116th Congress with Senator Gillibrand and plan to reintroduce this spring. Our bill emphasizes increased access to the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise program, which creates opportunities for businesses owned by minorities. Our bill also strengthens wage and labor standards, while increasing the robustness of environmental assessments for infrastructure projects because climate change is here and needs addressing.

The “Build Local, Hire Local Act,” is designed to create opportunities for all Americans -- veterans, the formerly incarcerated, and the disabled -- so we reinvest in our nation equitably. Our legislation even creates an apprenticeship pathway for workers in low-income communities to create vibrant, economically prosperous, and environmentally sustainable neighborhoods. At its heart, the “Build Local, Hire Local Act” starts the long-term process of undoing decades of highway and construction planning that has bifurcated communities of color. It begins to break down unjust barriers to employment and access to clean air that have impacted so many African Americans and communities of color.

Equally important, the legislation strengthens local hire policy. As you know, local hire policy is essential to providing good-paying transportation jobs for people living in California’s 37th Congress District in Los Angeles, which I have the honor of representing, where several transit and highway construction projects are ongoing. Without instituting local hire policy, Angelenos cannot fully benefit directly from the federal funds that flow to our District. What’s more, African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately impacted from accessing quality jobs.

This is why I was pleased to see President Biden’s “American Jobs Plan” support local hire policy.

It's clear Congressional and White House policy are aligned on this issue, which is why I also urge the committee to support the reinstatement of the Local Hire Pilot Program at the Department of Transportation (DOT), which was first instituted in 2015 and put on pause by the previous administration. The Local Hire Pilot Program is simple: it would permit recipients of federal highway and transit funds to hire locally. If reinstated, this would make a world of difference to Angelenos in the Congressional District, especially given how the pandemic has caused many businesses to suffer and shut down. Local hire policy will help uplift our District's long-term economic trajectory.

Last Congress, I was pleased to see H.R. 2, the Moving Forward Act, which passed the House in July 2020, include a provision to redefine "small business" for the DOT's Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) program so it matches the definition used by the Small Business Administration. That technical fix, if enacted into law, will allow small businesses currently not eligible for the DBE program to qualify. I urge the committee to keep this provision in its entirety in the final infrastructure package this Congress to ensure minority- and women-owned businesses can fully benefit from the DBE program.

Finally, Chair DeFazio and Members of the Committee, I'd like to call your attention to an intractable issue affecting the 37th Congressional District of California, as well as many other in the region and our nation – airplane noise.

Constituents in similar Congressional Districts, which are located near major international airports, in this case the Los Angeles International Airport, suffer from the adverse health effects of airplane noise. That includes sleep disruption, hypertension, and stress. As we know, Next Gen technology implemented by the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) created an otherwise unseen degree of overhead flight concentration. My staff have worked tirelessly to pursue avenues that might disperse flights, mitigate low-flying aircraft, and reduce the number of nighttime airplanes.

Right now, the COVID-19 pandemic has rattled the aviation industry, and in so doing, the pandemic has presented a unique opportunity to rethink aviation. We should be mindful of instituting changes that will allow residents who live beneath flight paths to experience a greater sense of calm. At its core, the FAA must prioritize airplane noise. Then, too, we must ensure the FAA uses the most reliable and accurate metrics to measure noise and that aircrafts are installed with the latest technology to limit the noise of engines. Let's work together to develop new and innovative means to address this longstanding challenge and provide our constituents with some relief.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Graves, and Members of the House Committee for the opportunity to testify.

It has been an honor to speak to the needs of my constituents and the policies that would elevate Angelenos and communities of color. I appreciate your time.