



**WRITTEN STATEMENT FOR THE RECORD**

**HON. JAMES H. WILLOX  
COUNTY COMMISSIONER  
CONVERSE COUNTY, WYOMING**

**IN COLLABORATION WITH THE  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES**

**HEARING TITLED, “AMERICA BUILDS: A REVIEW OF PROGRAMS TO ADDRESS ROADWAY  
SAFETY”  
BEFORE THE SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT  
COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE  
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**FEBRUARY 12, 2025**

Chair Rouzer, Ranking Member Norton and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on the importance of rural road safety and the tools needed to protect our shared constituents.

My name is Jim Willox, I am the Chairman of the Board of County Commissioners in Converse County, Wyoming, and have served on that Board since 2007. Today, I am representing the National Association of Counties (NACo), where I serve as a Vice Chair for the Transportation Policy Steering Committee.

### **About NACo**

NACo is the only national organization that represents all 3,069 counties, parishes and boroughs in the United States, including all 23 counties in Wyoming. We take pride in uniting county leaders from across the nation to advocate for the interests of America's counties as an essential partner in our nation's intergovernmental system. Founded in 1935, NACo assists the nation's counties, parishes and boroughs in pursuing excellence in public service to produce healthy, vibrant, safe and resilient communities.

### **About America's Counties**

Counties are highly diverse, not only in my state of Wyoming, but across the nation, varying immensely in natural resources, social and political systems, economic and structural circumstances and public health and environmental responsibilities.

Many of our responsibilities are mandated by the federal government and state governments. Although country obligations differ widely between states, most states give their counties significant authority including the construction and maintenance of roads, bridges and other infrastructure, the assessment of property taxes, record keeping, running elections, overseeing jails and court systems and public hospitals. Counties are also responsible for child welfare, consumer protection, economic development, employment/training, land use and water quality. We enact zoning and other land use ordinances to safeguard valuable natural resources and protect our local communities depending on state law and local responsibility.

Counties play a pivotal role in America's transportation systems. We own, operate and maintain 44 percent of public road miles and 38 percent of bridges; we oversee a third of the nation's transit systems and airports; and we even own numerous deepwater ports that facilitate billions of dollars in trade every year. In Wyoming, counties own 14,596 miles of road, which amounts to nearly 50 percent of all road miles in the state. More than 96 percent of these road miles are classified by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) as "rural."

This ownership comes at a significant cost to counties, which spend more than \$146 billion on infrastructure and more than \$60 billion on transportation every year. Given our central role in funding and maintaining infrastructure, I appreciate having the opportunity to speak with you today on behalf of myself and thousands of other county leaders across the country.

### **About Converse County**

Converse County is located in east central Wyoming and is home to approximately 14,000 hard-working residents. Converse County spans over 4,000 square miles, making it larger than Rhode Island, like all Wyoming counties. Additionally, with just over three residents for every one square mile of land, Converse County has a lower population density than the State of Wyoming, which is already the second least population-dense state in the country.

Our county is proud to offer a broad range of essential services to our population, including maintaining our roads and bridges, running the Converse County Airport, enforcing public safety and providing emergency response and health services. While we primarily fund these efforts using local property tax revenue, we also rely on our intergovernmental partners. Collaboration with federal and state agencies is crucial for addressing today's road safety challenges, especially in rural communities, and seizing future opportunities.

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I will focus my remarks on the primary safety challenges facing rural counties and recommendations for how Congress may address these urgent issues. America's counties agree on the following principles:

- **Rural counties face numerous and unique transportation challenges, including limited funding and road conditions.**
- **Streamlining the federal permitting process will help expedite essential safety projects in rural communities, ensuring that critical infrastructure improvements are completed more efficiently and cost-effectively.**
- **Given our unique and essential role in the nation's transportation system, counties believe a coordinated federal-state-local approach is critical to building a resilient and efficient transportation system.**

**Rural counties face numerous and unique transportation challenges, including limited funding and nontraditional road types.**

Rural counties grapple with unique transportation challenges that make it difficult to address the myriad safety concerns that face our communities. Chief among these concerns is our ongoing population losses, which reduce our tax base and directly impact our ability to fund infrastructure projects and maintain a large number of road miles.

In addition to constraints on our tax base, counties are often limited in their ability to adjust tax rates as well. The main general revenue sources for many counties are property and sales taxes. In fact, 45 states place limitations on county property tax authority, and the number of restrictions has expanded significantly since the 1990s. Only 29 states authorize counties to collect sales taxes, but almost always under various restrictions: 26 impose a sales tax limit and 19 require voter approval. Additionally, 42 states limit the authority of counties to raise or change property taxes. Only 12 states authorize counties to collect their own local gas taxes, which are limited to a maximum rate in most cases and often require additional citizen and/or state approvals for implementation.

Wyoming limits counties' ability to generate revenue through county-wide taxes, capping rates on real property, sales, and lodging taxes. Since counties rely on local revenue for infrastructure, this creates financial challenges.

Beyond population and budgetary constraints, many rural counties have economies that are reliant on commodity-based industries, like agriculture and energy production. For example, in Converse County we produce the oil and gas that powers the rest of the country and keeps the lights on for hundreds of millions of families. While these industries are vital for our success, it does mean that heavy trucks are a staple on our county roads. Even at the current 80,000-pound federal threshold for truck weights, they can cause substantial wear and tear on county-owned roads and create safety risks. Without adequate investment in rural infrastructure, counties like Converse County – and many others across the country – struggle to maintain the roads that are essential for transporting agricultural goods, energy resources and other commodities that fuel the national economy.

Lastly, the infrastructure in rural areas is not as standard as it is in suburban and urban communities. This includes using timber bridges instead of concrete or steel structures and having unpaved dirt roads rather than asphalt ones. In Converse County, we have gravel roads, with 512 out of 618 county-owned road miles being unpaved gravel.

These features—timber bridges and gravel roads—are essential parts of rural counties' transportation networks, but they do create different safety considerations. For example, gravel roads have less traction than traditional paved roads, leading to an increased risk of sliding, skidding and losing control of vehicles. Additionally, driving on gravel roads can kick up dust, which reduces visibility and can lead to accidents. This means that safety measures in rural areas will look very different from ones used elsewhere in the country.

**Streamlining the federal permitting process will help expedite essential safety projects in rural communities, ensuring that critical infrastructure improvements are completed more efficiently and cost-effectively.**

While counties are appreciative of the historic investments provided by the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, we have been limited in our inability to invest these resources to meet the safety and efficiency needs of our transportation systems.

Lengthy and complex federal approval processes, particularly transportation permitting and reviews under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), create significant delays, drive up project costs and undercut efforts to make our roads safer.

Before counties can even begin essential infrastructure projects, we must navigate a maze of federal permits, often waiting months or even years for approvals. This is especially true in Western states, given the large amount of federal land that increases the need for consultations and approvals.

In Converse County, for example, it recently took us over nearly ten months to obtain a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) right-of-way determination for a road that has existed since 1892 – before even beginning the standard environmental review process. We have faced similar issues with the U.S. Forest Service while working on a project that would ultimately make an existing road safer. These unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles prevent timely repairs and allow known safety risks to continue or even worsen.

NEPA has become an overly complex and time-consuming process that slows critical infrastructure improvements. While environmental reviews are important, maintaining existing roads should not be subject to the same level of scrutiny as entirely new projects. Wildlife considerations meant to protect endangered species from construction projects in previously undisturbed habitats should not delay our ability to perform routine maintenance activities like road grading and repairs. Greater flexibility in NEPA reviews would allow rural communities to move projects forward faster and improve road safety for residents.

Permitting delays are particularly frustrating in Converse County due to our extremely short construction season. Harsh weather conditions limit the timeframe in which crews can complete essential work, meaning even minor projects must be planned more than a year in advance. Unanticipated delays caused by NEPA or other federal regulations can cause counties to miss this window, pushing projects back by a year or more.

Finally, permitting delays during periods of high inflation can push project costs out of the budget for rural communities. The price of materials used for road maintenance like steel, asphalt and concrete has surged over recent years, meaning that even going through the normal multi-year permitting timeline can increase overall costs by 30 percent or more. Delays make these costs spike even higher, often forcing counties to scale back, postpone or cancel projects altogether. Reforming federal permitting processes would be a major step toward improving rural road safety, and counties stand ready to work with Congress to enact meaningful reforms in the next surface transportation bill.

**Given our unique and essential role in the nation's transportation system, counties believe a coordinated federal-state-local approach is critical to building a resilient and efficient transportation system.**

A strong federal, state and local partnership is essential for strengthening the nation's infrastructure and ensuring safe, reliable transportation networks. As stated before, counties own and maintain 44 percent of the nation's public roads, nearly 40 percent of bridges and a significant portion of public transit systems, making them key players in infrastructure development and maintenance. However, without direct collaboration and input from county governments, policies and funding decisions made at the federal and state levels may fail to address the unique challenges counties face, particularly in rural areas where road maintenance and upgrades are critical for public safety and economic growth.

While there has been an influx in federal transportation funding under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, most of this money—roughly 90 percent—goes to state departments of transportation. Although state departments of transportation can share these critical funds with local partners, a [recent study from the Brookings Institution](#) found that, on average, only 14 percent of state transportation funding is sub-allocated to locals.

Without access to formula funds, counties and other local governments must compete for the remaining 10 percent available through competitive grants – often against state agencies that are also eligible. This funding model disproportionately disadvantages rural communities, which face challenges in applying due to limited capacity and resources.

However, intergovernmental partnerships are about much more than funding. They are also about information sharing and ensuring that local expertise is being properly utilized to drive successful outcomes from federal and state investments.

This is particularly true when it comes to safety. Going back to something I mentioned earlier, a unique safety challenge we have in Converse County is our gravel roads. While in some areas, road safety might look like adding rumble strips or protecting a bike lane, in Converse County, we need to implement dust suppression techniques to maintain visibility and prevent crashes.

Unfortunately, dust suppression work is currently an ineligible use for federal transportation safety funding, meaning we have had to rely on environment-focused funding to pay for this critical work. This is a prime example of what can happen when counties do not have a seat at the table. This oversight has delayed and hampered our ability to perform safety-focused work.

Another area where county input can be valuable is when Congress or the Administration considers new mandates, even ones with a safety focus. Take the example of road striping, a basic way to keep drivers and vehicles on the path and prevent accidents. I have been in some discussions to increase the standard width of road lines from 4 inches to 6 inches, in order to increase visibility and ensure that sensors on new vehicles can detect the lines.

While this seems like a simple change, for counties with limited budget capacity, this is a 50 percent increase in the amount of paint needed to re-stripe the road. With many counties owning hundreds, if not thousands, of road miles, a 50 percent increase can be a serious financial burden. As Congress and the Administration considers changes or new mandates, having local voices at the table to raise concerns like this can help ensure that we are being deliberative and smart about how to effect positive change without creating unintended or undue consequences.

Going forward, America's counties look forward to working hand-in-hand with state and federal leaders to strengthen intergovernmental partnerships in this upcoming surface transportation bill in order to save lives and improve overall safety.

## **Conclusion**

Chair Rouzer, Ranking Member Norton and members of the Subcommittee, thank you again for inviting me here to testify today.

Rural transportation networks rely on strong collaboration between local, state and federal governments to ensure safe and efficient travel. From county roads to federal highways, every part of the system must function properly to support residents, industries and visitors. A weak link anywhere in the network can create safety risks and disrupt essential transportation.

We look forward to the continued dialogue with the Subcommittee on our shared goal of protecting our residents while strengthening the nation's infrastructure systems.