

Statement for Rep. Derek Kilmer (WA-6)
House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure
Member Day, April 14, 2021

Chair DeFazio and Ranking Member Graves,

Thank you for hosting today's Member Day hearing and for your leadership. I appreciate the opportunity to share with you the persistent concerns that face the district I have the honor of representing, which I know are also shared by so many other communities across our country.

You may know that I grew up in Port Angeles—a timber town on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington State. I was in high school right around the time the timber industry took it on the chin. During that time, I saw a lot of my friends' parents, and a lot of folks in my community, lose their jobs. It had a big impact on me, and it is why I've spent most of my adult life trying to figure out how to make sure we are doing a better job of protecting communities so that no one gets left behind in our society and economy.

Over the years that I've spent working in, and on behalf of, our region, I've seen firsthand how access to the funding and resources needed for critical infrastructure investments has made a real difference for communities in our neck of the woods. It's because of these infrastructure investments that small businesses and students can get connected online. It's because of these infrastructure investments that we can fund critical projects that will also help get folks to work in good-paying jobs. It's because of these infrastructure investments that we can protect access to clean drinking water and safeguard our public health. These investments are urgently needed, and I'm pleased for the opportunity to get to work on advancing these important priorities.

That being said, I have also seen firsthand how—even when these critical resources are available—persistent challenges continue to face distressed communities. Specifically, I’ve come to notice three recurrent problems in our current system.

First, even with the considerable investment of federal resources, there can be a lack of community capacity to actually reach those dollars. Distressed or small communities don’t necessarily have the financial capacity to employ grant writers who can navigate the complex system of grants and loans needed to access this funding.

Second, a lot of communities aren’t just facing short-term problems that can be fully addressed with short-term solutions. Indeed, there are a lot of communities—like those in my home district—that have experienced decades of decline. While one-off grants can be greatly helpful, it is clear to me that these communities need more persistent help that will solve their concerns in a more sustainable way.

Third, different communities have different needs. Some communities need investments that will help to create jobs after decades of economic downturn. Others need targeted assistance for brownfield clean up, or investments in other types of infrastructure needs. Some communities need to see investments in workforce development, while others may need resources that support job retention such as child care and other earned benefits.

That’s why I think it’s critically important we address these longstanding challenges in a new and different way. It’s why I have led the development of the Build Back Better Act – a bill that will establish a new, 10-year federal grant program administered by the Economic Development Agency to provide long-term, flexible assistance to persistently distressed communities and local labor markets. Among other things, the grants could be used to address regional labor market

and local labor market needs including land and site development, basic infrastructure and housing, job training and workforce outreach, and job retention programs.

These Build Back Better grants would have a transformational impact on distressed urban, suburban, and rural areas that would benefit from this long-term, flexible assistance. It will help to create prevailing wage jobs, provide resources to help residents access and retain employment, increase local per capita income, and drive long-term, sustained economic growth and opportunity.

As a nation, I strongly believe that we need an economic opportunity agenda that empowers communities, spurs widely shared economic growth, and increases local earnings so that our communities can get a real leg up. None of us want the main export of the communities we represent to be young people.

I am grateful for your leadership and partnership.

As the Committee continues to work to build on the comprehensive infrastructure package (H.R. 2) that the House passed last Congress and to implement the Biden Administration's American Jobs Plan, I look forward to working with you to incorporate this proposal – the Build Back Better Act – so that we can finally provide the long-term, dedicated support these communities need to create sustained job growth and economic opportunity. I have provided additional details regarding eligibility and targeting of these resources in the two-pager that I submitted for the record.

Thank you again for your leadership and for the opportunity to speak before the Committee today.