

Statement of Congresswoman Stacey Plaskett (VI)

Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure

Hearing: “Members’ Day”

April 14, 2021, 11 AM, 2167 Rayburn Building and via Zoom

Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Graves, members of the committee. Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to present a statement of my views as we move forward on infrastructure legislation.

As the Member of Congress representing the Virgin Islands, I came to Congress determined to increase long-term federal investments in all types of infrastructure. Supporting the movement of people, goods, and information through our infrastructure is crucial to driving investment in our communities and maintaining America’s economic competitiveness.

President Biden’s American Jobs Plan offers us a historic opportunity to build on the Moving Forward Act that was passed by the House last session and make further progress on infrastructure legislation. In the midst of so much uncertainty in the economy during the current public health crisis, the American people need the certainty to count on stable and strong investment in infrastructure to sustain and create jobs, and enhance the mobility and safety of American motorists, passengers, and throughput systems.

The American Jobs Plan proposes to make a sound investment in America. It is my hope that this committee takes care to make sure that equally extends to underserved areas like U.S. territories. I ask that this include provisions not only to reverse the inequitable funding cuts endured by the

territories over almost 30 years, but also to help these areas “catch up” and bring our federal highways up to federal standards.

While the several States have received steady, incremental increases in overall funding since expiration of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA), when the set-aside formula for funding the Territorial Highway Program was scrapped, severe cuts have resulted in great strain on the surface transportation infrastructure in the U.S. territories. Instead of continuing to receive a percentage of highway funding, the allocation for the territories was frozen at a flat dollar amount and that continues to this day. As a result, the Territorial Highway Program share of overall Federal-Aid Highway Program funding has progressively declined by 50%, from then until now, with the most significant decline occurring since enactment of the MAP-21 Act in 2012. In the meantime, substandard highways, roads and other infrastructure have been further affected by harsh weather patterns, which have caused the Virgin Islands and other U.S. territories to have an even more substantial need for federal transportation infrastructure funding.

In my district, the people still feel the aftermath of major category 5 hurricanes every day. It's been their "new normal" for some time before the current "new normal" of life in the midst of a global pandemic. We know firsthand that there are areas at every reach of this country that are in desperate need of revitalizing infrastructure. It is my primary request that the bill reported out of this committee to implement the American Jobs Plan, with respect to surface transportation, will lay the groundwork to do that.

For the long-neglected U.S. territories, I ask that the Territorial Highway Program be returned to a set-aside portion of Federal-Aid Highway Program funding, rather than a fixed amount; a set-aside that is equal to one-fifth of one percent of overall Federal-Aid Highway Program funding. A fifth of a penny for progress. That is what I ask.

Using the Federal-Aid Highway Program figures from the Moving Forward Act, which the House endorsed last year, the Territorial Highway Program would receive approximately \$110 million yearly under this formula, up from the woefully deficient \$42 million level that it currently receives, of which the Virgin Islands is apportioned 40%, which is only \$16.8 million each year. Even the smallest States with comparable populations would receive ten times that much in highway funding. For more than 25 years, the territories have had to endure with barely more than the same level of funding they received in 1993. The set-aside funding that I have requested will allow for new expansion and innovative transportation initiatives, rather than cyclically replacing or reconstructing the same infrastructure.

I would also ask the committee that the amendments concerning the territories added to the surface transportation portion of the Moving Forward Act in markup last year be continued in this year's surface transportation bill. This includes provisions assisting the territories to compete within more Department of Transportation programs.

In addition, as the territories are all insular areas of the United States, a separate funding stream for ferry boats and other maritime services would be appropriate. Americans in the Virgin Islands live and work on several

islands that cannot be connected by bridges. Although the Virgin Islands received Federal Highway Administration ferry program funding in the past, such funding has discontinued since the 2015 enactment of the FAST Act. Section 1112(c)(2) of the Act prohibited federal participation in the construction or purchase, for private ownership, of a ferry boat, ferry terminal facility, or other eligible project. While the government of the Virgin Islands owns the ferry terminals, it cannot afford to own or operate the ferries. As a result, the ferries themselves are privately owned and operated. Amending the law to exempt the Territorial Highway Program island areas from the restrictions on private ownership and operation would make the Virgin Islands ferry systems once again able to access Federal Highway Administration ferry program funding; and thereby allow for a reasonably-priced ferry system, thus growing the local economy.

Furthermore, I appreciate the opportunity that this committee has presented for investment in Member-designated projects this year. In the last decade, transformative projects that could catapult regional economies frequently get left on the planning room floor, either because of their size, complexity, or cost. Member-designated projects present a valuable opportunity to jumpstart new projects to connect communities from coast to coast, and to make big ideas a reality. In the Virgin Islands, opportunities like this are very important, as we face unique transportation challenges, based on our geographic location, with linking communities on each island area.

We also must continue our work to create new avenues to fund infrastructure projects in local communities that have been left behind, and in areas that have traditionally struggled to attract infrastructure funding for projects that

have holistic community support. The Community Transportation Investment Grants program, proposed in the Moving Forward Act of last year, would be exclusive to local community projects and with broad eligibility to make sure that they have fair access to funding and can compete in a broadly applicable grant program. I ask that the provisions to establish this program be continued in this year's surface transportation reauthorization bill. We also should continue proposals for new funding streams that specifically target areas and communities with very high rates of poverty, and rural areas, including U.S. territories.

Lastly, in this next bill we must make sure that we are investing in building resilient infrastructure, and adopting new, innovative technologies that bolster safety and efficiency to create the infrastructure of the future. Mr. Chairman, we know that infrastructure projects are consistently evaluated as one of the best returns on government investments, and that Americans would rather spend more time working and doing the things they love than sitting in traffic, wasting time and money.

The American people are very concerned with infrastructure, and American business is very concerned with infrastructure. They employ Americans, and they subcontract with our small businesses. The resulting cycle creates real growth and wealth in our communities in addition to getting them to and from work without a headache.

We must show our constituents, and our colleagues in the Senate, that we are determined to increase long-term federal investments in all types of infrastructure, and to build back better than we were before. Thank you.