

Testimony of COMTO President/CEO April Rai
House Subcommittee on Highways & Transit
“Examining Workforce Development and Job Creation in Surface Transportation Construction”

The Honorable Eleanor Holmes Norton, Chair
House T&I Subcommittee on Highways & Transit
Hearing on
“Examining Workforce Development and Job Creation in Surface
Transportation Construction”

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2167 Rayburn House Office Building

Testimony of Ms. April Rai, President/CEO
Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO)

Good afternoon, Chairwoman Norton and Members of the Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee on Transit and Highways. My name is April Rai, and I am National President and CEO of the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials, also known as COMTO.

COMTO is most appreciative of this opportunity to provide testimony before the Subcommittee on the topic of “Examining Workforce Development and Job Creation in Surface Transportation Construction”.

This issue is of vital importance to COMTO, which includes 34 US Chapters and one international chapter, totaling over 3000 members. Members include Individuals, Transportation Agencies, Private Sector Companies, Historically Underutilized Businesses (Small, Minority, Women, Veteran Owned, Disadvantaged), Educational Institutions and Non-Profit organizations. This translates into many tens of thousands of COMTO constituents. We thank Chairwoman Norton for her leadership in conducting this hearing, and if I may, I would like to make you aware of COMTO’s own initiatives to affect changes in the face of transportation and to increase minority presence in the industry:

CITY Internship Program

- **COMTO’s Careers in Transportation for Youth (CITY) Internship Program provides paid internship opportunities for minority students around the country, connecting them to real-world professional and practical experience in the transportation industry. An expanded version of the program will also focus on recruiting for apprenticeship programs.**

National Scholarship Program

- COMTO annually awards multiple national academic scholarships, to minority graduate and undergraduate students from across the country. Coupled with the efforts of our 35 chapters, millions of dollars have been awarded to deserving students.

As further information, COMTO was established in 1971 – we marked the 50th anniversary of our founding this past year – and reaffirmed our mission to ensure opportunities and maximum participation in the transportation industry for minority individuals, veterans, people with disabilities and certified M/W/DBE businesses through leadership training, professional development, scholarship and internship funding, political advocacy, partnership building and networking opportunities.

COMTO appreciates that Rep. Norton clearly shares our mission and vision for the industry. We believe that the leadership of a massive industry that has the responsibility of being the great connector, transporting all people and goods all the time should reflect the complex mosaic of those they serve. We believe that commitment to inclusion across race, gender, age, religion, identity, and experience moves us forward every day. To that end, we must be intentional about attracting professionals from diverse backgrounds to this industry.

Quick overview of COMTO’s Legislative Priorities

- **Local Hiring Initiatives/Workforce Development – Local hiring preferences strengthen communities by helping to create good local jobs, increasing**

- **opportunities and greater equity for people of color, women, veterans, and others facing barriers to employment. COMTO is pleased to know that rebuilding America through racial and economic equity and incentivizing job creation through local hiring and workforce development/business development initiatives, particularly through infrastructure, is a priority for the Biden Administration.**
- **DBE Program Improvements and Efficiencies – COMTO would like to see closer oversight by DBE officers to avoid fraudulent front companies, through more vigorous training programs for certification and compliance officers, and a stronger, clearer definition of “good faith efforts” with fewer waivers from DBE goals granted to majority-owned firms.**
- **Small Disadvantaged Business Size Standards – COMTO supports action that would conform the U.S. Department of Transportation’s (USDOT) DBE Size Standard with the Small Business Administration Standards (SBA). This is a simple fix to a big problem: in the interest of fairness and consistency and the survival of small minority owned businesses, the USDOT should use the Federal Aviation Administration’s model and use SBA’s size standards when making determinations with regard to small business status.**

- **Increase DBE Personal Net Worth (PNW) Ceiling** – Like the DBE/SBE revenue ceiling, current PNW levels discourage DBE growth, wealth building, quash successful graduation rates and limit bonding and insurance opportunities. It is just common sense to set a PNW grounded in reality and adjusted for inflation, in recognition of the challenges small and minority businesses face in the bonding and sureties market.
- **Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) DBE Program** – COMTO supports implementing a DBE program using the FHWA/FTA/FAA model. We advocate for consistency within the USDOT and the establishment of DBE participation goals on projects funded through the FRA and on monies funneled by FRA to state rail agencies – including High Speed Rail projects. An FRA DBE program would provide opportunities for new DBE start-ups, would mean millions of dollars for minority businesses and thousands of jobs for minority communities.

As President/CEO of COMTO, one of my top priorities is workforce development and strengthening the transportation workforce pipeline.

The Bi-Partisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) also known as the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) -- will generate \$1.2 trillion of investment – including \$550 billion in new spending -- into construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of U.S. roads, bridges, waterways, airports, rail and transit systems, and other

infrastructure, and will reauthorize surface transportation programs for the next five years. But without enough workers, efforts to strengthen roads and public transportation will be set back and service delivery to communities will be delayed, which, as we all know, will disproportionately impact communities of color.

In a recent New York Times article, entitled “*Skilled Workers Are Scarce, Posing a Challenge for Biden’s Infrastructure Plan*”, COMTO member Dr. Beverly Scott, Vice Chair of the President’s National Infrastructure Advisory Council, is quoted, in response to the issue, “Do we have the work force ready right now to take care of this? Absolutely not!”

We believe that JOBS is the operative word in the IIJA. But workforce recruitment and retention have been issues that plagued the transportation construction industry even before the pandemic. The pandemic only made those problems more acute and now threaten the industry’s ability to carry out the goals of the bill. The transportation construction industry has historically not well reflected groups to get the most out of the legislation. Both Congress and the Administration will need to be innovative and take aggressive action in the next few months to make these programs a reality, to give them the teeth to be effective and to establish accountability to measure results.

SEC. 13007 of the BIL does address WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION as it relates to SURFACE TRANSPORTATION WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, TRAINING, AND EDUCATION.

In this section, we understand that Secretary Buttigieg has been tasked with establishing a transportation workforce outreach program for targeted outreach to increase awareness of transportation career opportunities especially for diverse populations. In addition, it authorizes activities to “develop a robust surface transportation workforce with new skills resulting from emerging transportation technologies; and activities to attract new sources of job-creating investment” under a TRANSPORTATION EDUCATION AND TRAINING DEVELOPMENT AND DEPLOYMENT PROGRAM. This section also directs the Secretary to establish a program to make grants to educational institutions or State departments of transportation, in partnership with industry and relevant Federal departments and agencies to develop, test, and review new curricula and education programs to train individuals at all levels of the transportation workforce; or to implement the new curricula and education programs to provide for hands-on career opportunities to meet current and future needs. SMART grants applicants that promote a skilled workforce that is inclusive of minority or disadvantaged groups would be given priority. We are hopeful that this will include programs for emerging transportation professionals, STEM and construction curricula, especially in trade high schools, vocational schools and at Historically Black

Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). We are also hopeful that these programs will include the opportunity for public and private partnerships to advance program goals.

However, from what we can tell from the language, the program to implement this ambitious training deployment program is woefully underfunded compared to the multitude of tasks and goals assigned to the Secretary.

Importantly, the Biden Administration has made a commitment to smashing the agency silos, and we believe this will be a key factor. We agree that Secretary Buttigieg should continue his efforts to negotiate MOUs and to establish a working group made up of the Secretary of Commerce, the Secretary of Energy, Secretary of Labor, and other federal agency heads. The combined efforts and resources of each of these agencies are necessary to create the workforce needed to fulfill the goals and timelines of transportation infrastructure projects.

The Build Back Better Act (BBBA) would have included \$20 billion to help build that national workforce. The programs included expanding apprenticeships, fostering mentor/protégé relationships and investing in increased enforcement of labor law and civil rights violations to help diversify the workforce: these same concepts should be applied to funds dispersed through the IIJA.

The obstacles that minorities and women have faced persist. Needless to say, despite the change in racial and gender demographics and the expected growth of

women and minorities in the workforce, these groups are still underrepresented and underutilized in the transportation construction industry at large. According to career experts Zippia, currently, there are over 808,891 construction workers employed in the United States. However, only 6.2% of all construction workers are women, while 93.8% are men. According to that same source, the most common ethnicity of construction workers is White (58.7%), followed by Hispanic or Latino (24.5%) and Black or African American (10.7%). The United States Bureau of Labor, which also keeps official records specifically on highway construction, the numbers are similar: of this total, 2.6 percent were women, 6.2 percent were Black or African-American, 1.6 percent Asian and 31 percent Hispanic or Latino/Latina.

According to information provided by the Transportation Research Board (TRB), “...research suggests women may not feel welcomed or attracted to the transportation industry. A 2015 Center for Transportation Research and Education project noted that, although women are an asset to transportation operation roles, fewer than 2% of the U.S. railroad workforce was comprised of females and fewer than 5% of drivers in the motor carrier industry were women. The industry can find itself mired in old patterns and cultural norms that can result in a lack of inclusivity, making it unable to attract uniquely talented workers from a diverse population that includes women applicants.”

There is a cost associated with efforts to diversify the construction workforce. However, aggressive recruitment, training, and other best practices targeted

toward minorities and women have been shown to have significant value and return on investment. Research has shown many benefits of a diverse and inclusive workplace, including innovation, new perspectives, higher profits and ironically, the domino effects of both increased abilities to continue to recruit a diverse talent pool and higher employee retention.

But we realize this takes public and private sectors' EMPLOYER education, to make the industry understand and embrace the benefits of workforce diversity and development and to education programs that stimulate interest in transportation construction careers. And beyond that, we support incentivizing private sector efforts by giving credit or weight to majority prime contractors who implement local hiring efforts and allocation of resources to the best practices I mentioned above to increase minority and women in the construction trades, and to strengthen a pipeline of workers to better reflect the demographics of the country.

I would like to conclude by offering the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials as a resource to this subcommittee and its Members as you move forward to consider legislative activity to address the needs of the workforce of the future.

With your indulgence, I would like to encourage our membership to submit statements to our National office on this topic, which I will in turn submit to your staff as part of the hearing record. Thank you again for this opportunity and for your time and consideration of these important issues.

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