



VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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Investing in Our Transportation Future

The Honorable Nick J. Rahall, II, Congressman, 3rd District, West Virginia
United States House of Representatives

United States Representative Nick J. Rahall, II, a West Virginia native who represents his state's Third Congressional District, currently serves as the ranking member on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, and served the last four years as the chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee, on which he was a member for 34 years.

First elected in 1976, Congressman Rahall is currently serving his 18th term in the House of Representatives. Before his election to Congress, he made a career as a businessman and served as staff assistant for United States Senator Robert C. Byrd.

He was a key architect in the formulation of the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (known as TEA 21), which established the Rahall Transportation Institute (RTI), a consortium of five southern West Virginia colleges, housed at Marshall University. Soon after, Congressman Rahall helped RTI win designation as a National Maritime Enhancement Institute, enabling the school to compete for federal grants related to a great number of maritime activities. This is one of only seven so-named universities in the nation, further advancing RTI's mission of "Building Jobs through Transportation" for West Virginia.

I find it intriguing that so much of our literature and so many movies and television shows, in their depictions of a futuristic world, prominently include fantastic modes of transportation. Consider Jules Verne's Nautilus, H.G. Wells' time machine, Gene Roddenbury's Enterprise – with its incredible transporter – and even George Jetson's flying family car. Ever more inventive means of conveying people and things from place to place seems a universally thrilling concept, perhaps because transportation challenges confront each of us in such a fundamental way every day and because overcoming those challenges is a hope we all share as we envision a better future.

To my mind, that fact – that our transportation needs so fundamentally affect our daily lives, our health, our jobs, our businesses, our communities – is also a key reason why ensuring a modern and safer transportation system is a basic government responsibility.

Without the ability to move people and products in an efficient manner, business suffers, workers suffer, families suffer, our nation suffers. Particularly in this Internet age, when sellers and buyers can reach across national borders to conduct commerce in a click, the ability to transport products expeditiously is a competitive necessity for maintaining and expanding America's leading role in the worldwide marketplace.

My idea of an American transportation system is one that is multimodal – one that interconnects highways to waterways to railways to airways. It is one that employs Americans in its construction and maintenance, as well as in its operation. And it is also one that reaches into rural areas, like much of West Virginia, ensuring that businesses in small towns can participate in

the international economy and in partnership or in competition with businesses in urban industrial centers. Such a transportation system also ensures that families in small country towns can reach doctors and their kids can safely get to school.

It is my belief that West Virginians are just as deserving of economic opportunity as the residents of urban centers, and that is one of the key reasons I have made building a better transportation system in our state a priority throughout my career of public service. Having accumulated many years of experience and expertise in transportation matters in Congress, I now serve as the top Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, a post that enables me to have greater input into our national transportation policies and to help ensure that the needs of our state are more fully considered and more sufficiently addressed.

To my mind, enabling the fruits of the labor of West Virginia's coal miners, manufacturers and





craftsmen to reach distant consumers is a benefit not just to the economy of our state, but also to the economy of the whole nation.

And, certainly, enabling visitors to more easily travel to our state and partake of our host of enriching natural wonders is a benefit to all Americans, as well as to our own tourism industry and the communities that host our guests.

Unfortunately, there are those in Congress who want to ax spending for highways and bridges, who want to privatize Amtrak, and who want to cut monies for essential air service and transit programs. But cutting federal investment only puts a greater burden on our states and localities, which have their own severe budgetary constraints. Such a lack of Federal leadership would result in a patchwork transportation system that cannot sustain the kind of growth we need in America right now to put us back on the path to economic prosperity.

The choice our nation faces today is one of sharply contrasting priorities. We can either make the kinds of bold investments that our nation needs, not just to keep pace with the rest of the world but to continue to lead it, or we can allow our transportation infrastructure to continue to crumble, jeopardizing lives and livelihoods and accruing a greater transportation liability for our children and grandchildren. We have all heard plenty of free-flowing rhetoric about budget deficits, which certainly need our attention, but we ought to give a little more attention to our infrastructure deficits, which pose an equivalent threat to the well-being of our citizens.

For my part, I will continue to use my leadership role on the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to help ensure that West Virginia receives its full measure of Federal investment so that modern roads, bridges, airports, railways and waterways are more than just some futuristic fantasy, but that they become the solid reality we all desire for ourselves and for generations to come. ▽

