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## TRANSPORTATION POLICY FOR THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The National Association of Development Organizations (NADO) provides training, information and representation for regional development organizations serving the 82 million people living in small metropolitan and rural America. Founded in 1967 as a public interest group, NADO is part of the intergovernmental partnership among federal, state and local governments.

NADO members—known variously as councils of government, economic development districts, planning and development districts and regional planning commissions—provide valuable professional and technical assistance to over 1,800 counties and 15,000 small cities and townships. NADO members also administer an array of federal programs on a regional basis, including aging, community and economic development, emergency management, small business development finance, transportation and workforce development programs.

### HIGHWAY AND TRANSIT PROGRAMS IN TEA-21 REAUTHORIZATION

When Congress passed the landmark Transportation Equity Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (TEA-21) in June 1998, it marked the beginning of a new era in rural transportation. In addition to providing significantly more federal funds to help improve the infrastructure and services in small town and rural America, the act reinforced the intermodal philosophy of the 1991 ISTEA legislation and enhanced the role of rural local officials in the decision-making and planning process.

In crafting the next reauthorization package for the nation's highway and transit programs, the members of NADO urge Congress and the Bush administration to retain the existing set of core programs, increase investments for all modes of transportation, continue deploying Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) programs, and enhance flexibility for state and local governments. Specifically, NADO places a high priority on:

- **Strengthening the role of rural local officials** in the statewide planning and decision-making process, the gateway for accessing federal transportation funds.
- **Addressing safety on rural two-lane roads.** Although only 40 percent of all vehicle miles are traveled on rural roads, about 60 percent of traffic accident fatalities in 1999 took place on two-lane rural roads (25,107 of 41,611).
- **Dedicating and increasing highway trust fund revenues** for transportation investments as well as assuring stability within the Revenue Aligned Budget Authority (RABA) mechanism.
- **Simplifying the administrative process** for the Transportation Enhancement program.
- **Increasing funds for both urban and rural transit programs** in addition to encouraging better coordination of existing federally-funded transit providers.

## STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF RURAL LOCAL OFFICIALS IN THE STATEWIDE PLANNING PROCESS

Best described as the gateway for accessing federal highway funds, the statewide transportation planning process has slowly evolved since its creation under the 1991 ISTEA bill to the \$218 billion highway and transit bill known as TEA-21. In 1991, Congress outlined a prominent role for urban elected officials in the transportation planning and investment process through Metropolitan Planning Organizations. However, the ISTEA legislation failed to give rural elected officials the same rights and responsibilities, instead leaving control of rural transportation decisions almost entirely in the hands of state officials. *This double standard was created despite the fact that 3.1 million of the nation's 3.9 million mile highway network passes through rural areas.*

As part of the 1998 TEA-21 bill, Congress directed states to enhance their consultation practices with rural local officials. While the new federal law did not mandate a specific process for involving rural local officials, the Statement of Managers report encouraged states to use existing regional planning and development organizations to facilitate the participation of rural officials (a practice currently used by over 20 states).

After nearly five years of outreach and negotiations, the US Department of Transportation issued final regulations on January 23, 2003. The rule, which is based on a compromise developed by NADO, NACo and AASHTO, specifically implements the rural consultation provisions of TEA-21.

Under the rule, each state must now develop a documented process for soliciting and gathering the input of rural local officials on statewide transportation plans and investment programs. Most importantly, the consultation process must be "separate and discrete" from the public involvement process. This provision reflects the fact that rural local governments have significant transportation responsibilities, including ownership of roads, bridges, rural transit systems and other transportation infrastructure.

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*According to a new National Academy of Public Administration report, the benefits of involving local stakeholders in rural transportation planning are overwhelming. Meaningful participation helps build more trust in government, results in better plans and programs, and generates more support for implementing plans and projects. All of which contribute to the improved performance of the transportation system.*

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### **As part of the TEA-21 reauthorization bill, the members of NADO urge Congress to:**

- Provide rural local officials with the "cooperation" designation enjoyed by urban officials, instead of the current level of "consultation".
- Target sufficient resources within the statewide planning and research account to enable state Departments of Transportation and rural local officials to implement and comply with the new federal regulations on rural consultation.
- Encourage states to use existing regional planning and development organizations to facilitate the involvement of local elected officials in the statewide planning and investment process.
- Support a new rural capacity building program that is comparable to the existing FHWA program for metropolitan areas.

## **RURAL ROAD SAFETY INITIATIVE**

About 60 percent of American traffic accident fatalities in 1999 took place on rural two-lane roads, according to a 2000 report by the General Accounting Office (GAO) that examined federal highway spending and safety records by road classification. When adjusted for vehicle miles traveled, some rural local roads had a fatality rate over six times greater than urban interstates. These statistics are extremely troubling since only 40 percent of all vehicle miles are traveled on rural roads.

In addition to the tremendous personal and social costs, highway deaths and injuries place a huge burden on the national economy. The US Department of Transportation estimates the cost at around \$150 billion annually. While there are many contributing factors to the prevalence of rural road fatalities—such as speed and distance traveled, emergency response time and seat belt use—Congress has an opportunity to help state and local officials alleviate the situation.

**As part of the TEA-21 reauthorization bill, the members of NADO urge Congress to:**

- Support a new \$1 billion per year program to help state and local governments address rural road safety issues. These funds could be used for a variety of activities such as improving horizontal and vertical alignment; improving sight distance; widening lanes and shoulders; installing and upgrading guardrails; installing rumblestrips; and improving lighting, signage and pavement markings.

## **ADDITIONAL PRINCIPLES FOR TEA-21 REAUTHORIZATION**

**As part of the TEA-21 reauthorization bill, the members of NADO also urge Congress to:**

- Take into consideration the different challenges facing small metropolitan and rural areas with respect to the new standards for ozone and particulate matter. When the new EPA standards are eventually applied, 300 or more additional counties will be designated as non-attainment, including many small metropolitan and rural counties. Frequently, these areas are victims of pollutants from large urban areas, leaving them with few options to remedy the air quality problem.
- Continue programs that are important to local communities such as the bridge replacement and rehabilitation program (including off-system bridges), transportation enhancements, the scenic byway program and the access to jobs initiative. Congress should also examine options for reducing the administrative paperwork and procedures required to implement these programs.
- Provide the programmatic framework and flexibility for communities to pursue multi-modal solutions to area transportation needs, including initiatives that connect the various modes, both passenger and freight.
- Expand rural and small transit investments to ensure that all communities have access to public and community transportation choices and options. Congress should encourage better coordination and cooperation among existing federally-funded transit providers. Congress should also examine the growing track maintenance and condition problems with short-line and low-density railroads, which are vital links for industries in rural areas.

## AVIATION REAUTHORIZATION

The national transportation network functions properly when it helps form vital social and economic connections. This is especially true in small metropolitan and rural America where distance and a scattered population make these connections even more important. Transportation is essential not only for linking people to jobs, health care and family in a way that enhances their quality of life, but also for contributing to regional economic growth and development by linking business to customers, goods to markets and tourists to destinations.

Within the transportation system, the aviation network plays an enormous role in transporting goods and people. In 2001, 542 million people flew domestically and another 52 million flew internationally on US carriers, according to the US Department of Transportation. Unfortunately, since the deregulation of the aviation industry in the late 1970s the availability of affordable and reliable air service in most rural and small metropolitan areas has dramatically declined.

**Currently, there are three important programs that help airports in small communities.** The first is known as the **Small Community Air Service Development Pilot Program**. Created under the Aviation Investment and Reform Act for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (AIR-21), the new program is designed to help improve air service to small communities that suffer from insufficient air carrier service or unreasonably high airfares. AIR-21 authorized \$27.5 million for the program in FY2002, with an overall limit of 40 communities nationally and no more than four communities per state. Under the final FY2002 Transportation spending bill, Congress funded the program at \$20 million through a set-aside in the Airport Improvement Program.

The second program is the **Essential Air Service program**, which was created to ensure that rural and remote communities that had scheduled air service before airline deregulation would continue to receive service after the deregulation law was implemented. In 1996, Congress set a minimum program level of \$50 million for the Essential Air Service program. Following the terrorist events of September, Congress provided \$63 million for the program through the regular appropriations process and an additional \$50 million in an emergency supplemental. The program currently subsidizes scheduled air service in about 115 communities, including 32 in Alaska.

The final program is the **Airport Improvement Program**, which has provided grant support to airports for airport development and planning since the early 1980s. Fully funded through the Airport and Aviation Trust Fund, the program was nearly doubled under AIR-21 to over \$3.3 billion in FY2002. Traditionally, program funds are spent on projects that support aircraft operations including runways, taxiways, noise abatement, land purchases and safety upgrades. With air travel expected to top 1 billion annually within the next decade, the Airport Improvement Program is expected to play a critical role in helping airports meet the growing demand.

**As part of the AIR-21 reauthorization, the members of NADO urge Congress to:**

- Implement federal policies and programs that ensure rural communities have access to affordable, reliable and safe air service.
- Increase funding and the number of communities served under the Small Community Air Service Development Program and Essential Air Service program.
- Provide full funding for the Airport Improvement Program.