

Statement of Senator Patty Murray
Chairman, Subcommittee on Transportation, Housing
And Urban Development and Related Agencies
Floor Consideration of the FY10 Appropriations Bill
September 10th, 2009

Mr. President, I am very pleased that the Senate is now considering the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations bill for the coming fiscal year.

As we begin consideration of this bill it is important to note that it has already been supported by broad bipartisan majorities. The Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee has 20 members – one fifth of the Senate. It is one of largest subcommittees in the Senate. But despite the diversity of views on our very large subcommittee, back on July 29th, we voted unanimously to report the bill to the Full Appropriations Committee. And the next day, the Members of the Committee voted unanimously to report the bill to the U.S. Senate.

Mr. President, This bill has broad bipartisan support because it addresses the very real housing and transportation needs of American families across all regions of the nation. It has bipartisan support because it touches the lives of all of our constituents in ways they can appreciate each day.

Whether it's the parent that commutes everyday and needs safe roads or new public transportation options so they can spend more time with their families, Or the young family searching for safe and affordable communities to raise their children, Or the recently laid off worker who needs help to afford their rent and stay off the street - this bill has a real impact on the American families that are struggling in these troubling economic times.

The hardworking Americans that are not only losing their jobs, but also their homes, and their financial security. Six months ago, Congress passed a recovery package that is now creating jobs, rebuilding infrastructure, and laying a strong foundation for long-term economic growth. It is a good start—and this bill builds on and strengthens that effort.

It makes needed and serious investments in our transportation infrastructure, as well as in housing and services to support our Nation's most vulnerable. And it ensures that the federal agencies that so many communities count on have the resources they need to keep commuters safe, and keep communities moving and prospering.

Our bill takes a balanced approach that addresses the most critical needs we face in both transportation and housing, while remaining financially responsible and staying within the constraints of the budget resolution.

I have been very fortunate to be joined by my Ranking Member, Senator Bond, in crafting this package. Senator Bond's long service on the Appropriations Committee as well as his work on the Public Works Committee has made him one of our leading experts in the areas of both transportation and housing. Throughout his career, Senator Bond has demonstrated tireless leadership and commitment to the mission of HUD. I couldn't have a better or more experienced partner in this effort.

Infrastructure

Mr. President, this bill provides over \$75 billion in budgetary resources for the Department of Transportation to support continued investment in transportation infrastructure, including bridges, ports, public transportation, airports, rail, and the Nation's highway system.

It provides \$11 billion to support and expand public transit – which continues to see record growth in ridership – as well as \$1.2 billion to invest in intercity and high speed rail to expand options for commuters, ease congestion on our roads, and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

It also includes \$1.1 billion to continue the highly competitive surface grants program initiated earlier this year as part of the recovery package.

That program, which provides matching funds to projects making a significant impact on communities and regions, generated tremendous interest from state and local authorities.

The bill supports the FAA’s efforts to develop its next generation air transportation system to support projected growth in air travel in coming year. It also invests \$3.5 billion in capital improvements at airports across the country.

Safety

This bill also includes targeted increases to address critical problems with transportation safety.

An increase above the President’s budget is provided to hire 236 more air safety inspectors and 50 more air traffic controllers.

At present, FAA inspectors can’t spend enough time out in the field directly observing air carrier operations firsthand. The new positions added in this bill will help correct the problem and improve FAA oversight.

The bill also includes \$50 million for a new program in railroad safety technology, including Positive Train Control, as well as \$150 million for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority to ensure that tragedies like the one we saw earlier this summer never happen again.

Housing

In addition to these important investments in transportation, the bill we have before us today represents a firm commitment to providing critical housing and supportive services to families most affected by the economic crisis.

The bill provides nearly \$46 billion in budgetary resources for the Department of Housing and Urban Development, including \$100 million for HUD’s housing counseling program to: Help families make responsible decisions when purchasing a home, to avoid scams and aggressive lending tactics, and to help families facing foreclosure stay in their homes. These funds will be an important tool in our efforts to combat foreclosures. This counseling will also help to avoid problems in the future by preparing new homeowners for the changing housing market.

The bill provides more than \$18 billion for tenant based rental assistance, or section 8, including an increase of over \$1 billion for the renewal of Section 8 vouchers.

The bill also provides increased funding for the operation of public housing, for a total level of \$4.75 billion. These funds will help to ensure that our Nation’s low-income families – which are always among the hardest hit during lean economic times – continue to have access to safe, affordable housing.

Senator Bond and I are particularly proud that this bill includes \$75 million for vouchers for the joint HUD-Veterans Affairs supportive housing program, which will provide an additional 10,000 homeless veterans and their families with housing and supportive services.

While this program has helped contribute to an overall reduction in homelessness among veterans, we have seen disturbing increases over the past several years in the number of homeless female veterans, many of whom have children -- That's unacceptable.

The new funding the bill provides will help ensure that those who have already given so much to their country through their military service are not forced to live on the street.

In addition to supporting our nation's heroes, this bill also addresses the needs of some of our most vulnerable citizens by providing increased funding to support affordable housing for the elderly, disabled, those suffering from AIDS, youth aging out of foster care, and the Nation's homeless.

Community Building

This bill also focuses on strengthening communities at a time when the economy threatens programs that are the backbone of many of our towns and cities.

It provides almost \$4 billion for the Community Development Block Grant program to support investments in public infrastructure, housing rehabilitation, construction, and public services. Assistance that is critical to our States and local governments right now.

The bill also supports innovative approaches to revitalizing the Nation's public housing. The new Choice Neighborhoods program included in the bill builds on the success of the HOPE VI ("Hope-6") program which my colleagues, Senators Bond and Mikulski, deserve a great deal of credit for.

In summary, Mr. President, this bill provides assistance to those who need it most, and it directs resources in a responsible and fiscally prudent way.

It is a bill that addresses the needs of families in every region of the country - families who are looking for the federal government to step up and provide solutions to everything from congestion, to transportation safety, to foreclosures, to affordable housing.

And that's why it's a bill that's attracted widespread bi-partisan support it helps commuters, helps homeowners, helps the most vulnerable in society, and helps our economy.

I urge all Senators to support this bill and move us rapidly to final passage. With that, I would yield to my friend and partner, Senator Bond.