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Prepared remarks by Representative Benjamin A. Vig

Good Afternoon Senator Conrad. I am Ben Vig of Aneta, and state Representative for the 23rd Legislative District which covers Nelson, Griggs, Steele, Eddy, Benson Counties and Spirit Lake Nation. I think it's great you are having these field hearings across North Dakota to see our transportation infrastructure and to hear how some improvements are needed before the next Congressional Transportation bill is in the Senate or the House. I know you held similar hearings out west along US Highway 85 corridor.

The last ten days, farmers have been busy to wrap up harvest. In the Legislature I serve on the Agriculture committee where I am reminded that farming and ranching is our states number one industry with one out of four jobs being agriculture related. We wouldn't have a strong industry if it wasn't for the transportation infrastructure. As I was hauling soybeans to Finley a couple of days ago, I was sitting in the line at the elevator, surrounded by semi-trucks that said Finley, Hope, Sharon, Cooperstown, Tolna, and Hatton. We all haul grain to Finley Farmers Elevator because it is designated 110 car unit elevator with Burlington Northern Sante Fe. There was a process that BNSF started some fifteen years ago to concentrate towards larger elevators, and send longer trains, primarily 110 cars to these elevators, where in the past BNSF would send 54 cars to most elevators.

In concentrating our grain elevators, all the farmers connect on our rural state highways and drive to town, these are 'farm to market roads.' As time goes, we need to renew our investment in farm to market roads across North Dakota. North Dakota has over 7300 miles of state highways that our citizens rely on. As the farm trucks get longer, farm machinery get wider, and more construction occurs in our region for wind development, are farm to market roads need to be rebuilt wide enough to handle our equipment today. As I was driving the grain truck home from Finley the other day, a combine went halfway down the ditch to provide room to pass. What other industry does a person traveling on our roads have to drive down the ditch to provide room for others? Frankly our farm to market roads need more attention. I have seen other states have passing lanes on their highways, or wider shoulders so there is no hazard to anyone. If progress was made for efficiencies in the railroad hauling our agriculture commodities to market, the ball was dropped when it came to farm to market roads, and their efficiencies. We need to rebuild the foundation on our farm to market roads for safety purposes and for convenience to travelers. I would tremendously like to see this a priority in the next Transportation bill.

I would be remised if I didn't mention our county and township roads. We have had high volume crops in the past several years, such as corn, barley, which resulted in more truck traffic than normal. And with oil pipeline and wind farm construction, our county and township roads have been getting used a lot, and that is great.

Last spring we received a large amount of flooding from the melting snow, and the gravel was washed away. The foundation of our township and county roads were being exposed, rutted up, and are in desperate need of repair. FEMA did provide emergency funds to put gravel back on, and replace culverts, but with over 75,500 miles of county and township roads in North Dakota, I think this is another vital part of our infrastructure that needs more attention. There are still a great number of people living on the land, working the family farms, and we too need a transportation system that we can be proud of. Safe and convenient.

Last week, I attended a conference on economic security and stability, which concentrated on people living in poverty. The presenters at the conference mention that transportation makes up roughly 1/6 of a families budget, or an individuals budget. Whether a person is commuting to work, going to a ball game, or traveling to the doctors office, transportation is a huge part of the budget. In communities like Michigan, and Aneta, people are commuting to work, to school, to the doctors' office, or to a hockey game. We are on the road all the time and it costs money.

Another aspect of our transportation system needs to include public transportation. Across my legislative district, so many of my constituents live on a fixed income, and driving is quite expensive at \$2.80 for a gallon of gas. Our communities have established senior citizen buses, for people to make trips to Devils Lake, Grand Forks, or Fargo. I know my grandma like so many senior citizens, board the Steele County bus to make trips to Fargo, and the public bus is necessity for her to go to the mall or the drug store, or eye clinic as she does not like the urban driving. Public busing is very important for the people in our communities. Ensuring we have funds for buses, preferably fuel efficient buses, bus drivers, and operating budgets should be a huge priority in the next Transportation bill.

Portions of the country are working to develop 'high speed rail' to commute from city to city. As you know, we have Amtrak that travels through Michigan, with depots in Grand Forks and Devils Lake. Developing a mass transit system that is efficient to operate for the public entities involved and is friendly to the families budget is always a tough act to balance, but when public transportation brings less stress on individuals for traveling through crowded city streets, or driving long distances, my grandma mentioned why she didn't take the public bus years before.

I think we need to start advertising more the use of public transportation. With people working longer, working harder, and their incomes staying relatively stagnant, I think public transportation and mass transit is way to save money while traveling.

For putting people to work with a national economic recession, I think rebuilding our infrastructure is the primary place to begin. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was a great beginning as it invested in our communities, and not overseas, gave new projects to construction crews rebuilding roads and waterways, and many projects in numerous communities.

By rebuilding our farm to market roads so they can last another 50 years, we will have created jobs, put people to work in our local communities much like what Governor Bill Guy and President Kennedy did in the 1960s when the last highway construction upgrades took place across North Dakota. With that, we need to rebuild the foundations of our county and township roads too. As I mentioned, farming and ranching is still our number one industry in the state, and we need the infrastructure to handle another 50 years or more of prosperity, with people living on the land.

We also need to look at building up public transportation and mass transit for North Dakota. Building the infrastructure so we can travel with ease to the doctors office, to school or to a hockey game, we will have improved the quality of life, cut costs for a families budget.

With all of this we often focus on putting people to work or creating jobs in our communities. But I asked some friends who are still in college, and a couple of friends who are in the workforce now, about what it takes to live in North Dakota and what it takes to live in our communities. And they all said money. We all need to have a salary we can live on. After all, if transportation is roughly 1/6 of a family's budget, you know what health care is on a family's budget, what education costs are on a families budget. As expenses continue to rise, and incomes remain stagnant, \$10 an hour doesn't pay many bills any more. You probably noticed as well, that agriculture commodity prices have fallen dramatically too. Cutting expenses is always a priority in family budgets and I think working towards efficiency in transportation is a good step in the right direction.

I would like to thank you again for coming in to Michigan. Mayor Allen Orwick is here. He and the community work hard to keep main street full, and looking great, and bringing people to town. Francis Ziegler is here, and thank him for the work the Department of Transportation has done. We have had more projects across the state this year, because of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, and our state dedication to roads. I thank everyone for turning out.

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