

## Testimony

**Presented to:** **Advisory Commission on  
Intergovernmental Relations**

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Chairman Kaldor and committee members, my name is Jon Mielke. I am a research associate with the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute. I appear before you on behalf of a steering committee that has been created to guide a special study directed at generating public involvement in issues related to transportation infrastructure and personal mobility. This project is being undertaken by the Transportation Institute. Both the Institute and its advisory council are products of state law.

Shortly after the last legislative session, the Institute's advisory council directed its staff to marshal resources to work with affected local, state, and federal entities to facilitate the public input process regarding future funding for personal and freight mobility in North Dakota.

North Dakota's transportation system is central to the quality of life and the prosperity of its citizens. It allows individuals to travel to work, school, and medical appointments; it promotes economic development; and it links local businesses to the global marketplace. The transportation system is, however, severely stressed and faces significant challenges related to growth in freight and passenger traffic, spiraling construction and fuel costs, an aging population, and increased international trade.

North Dakota also faces immense and growing costs for needed transportation projects and programs. Despite the growth-related demands for facilities and services mentioned earlier, it appears that inflation has

eroded the buying power of appropriated funds and forced federal, state, county, and local transportation departments into a preservation mode. It is no longer a matter of responding to increased demands for facilities and services, it is becoming a matter of scraping to just barely keep what we already have in place.

Given this budget outlook and the growing demands of our citizens and of our economy, it is now more important than ever that transportation planners and elected officials reach out to the public and convey to them what services can be provided with available funding and to determine if these services are sufficient to satisfy the public's needs. It is critical that the public becomes aware of what facilities and services can be provided so it can provide fully informed and fiscally constrained input concerning its needs.

The project that we are undertaking is designed to promote public involvement in issues related to transportation infrastructure and personal mobility. We intend to do this by hosting a series of 8 local workshops around the state. It is anticipated that these meetings will each have 50-100 participants and that these individuals will represent local and county governments, local businesses, the Legislature, and individual citizens. A list of related tasks and time lines is attached to my testimony, along with a fuller description of this project's goals and work plan.

These workshops will have three purposes. The first goal is to disseminate information about North Dakota's existing transportation system. This information will include presentations concerning the:

- Size and condition of the existing system,
- Funding sources that maintain and operate the system,
- Planning and project selection processes, and
- Long term income and expense projections.

With this information in hand, participants will be asked to provide input concerning their future transportation needs. These needs may relate to infrastructure or to personal mobility issues such as transit. Attempts will also be made to update infrastructure needs assessments that were prepared for state, county, and local roads early in this decade. This input and related need assessment updates may be especially useful for transportation planners and elected officials as they begin to develop future operating and capital improvement budgets.

In addition to educating participants and gathering input, this project is designed to encourage future involvement in subsequent decision making processes regarding program design, project selection, and finance. We hope that a more informed and active citizenry will be viewed as beneficial by elected officials and transportation planners.

As the attached task list indicates, we plan to conclude this project with a state level conference. This conference will review the input gathered at the local workshops and present a series of related recommendations. Hopefully this information will be beneficial to your committee and to the Legislature.

I would like to point out that I presented similar testimony to the Interim Committee on Transportation a couple weeks ago. Since your committee may also be considering matters that involve funding for rural roads and bridges and public transportation, we also want to make you aware of our ongoing effort and offer to share our findings with you.

Mr. Chairman and committee members, that concludes my prepared testimony. I would be happy to respond to any questions that you might have.

# Generating Public Involvement in Transportation Policy and Funding Decision Making Processes

July 2007

## Background

North Dakota's transportation system is central to the quality of life and the prosperity of its citizens. It allows individuals to travel to work, school, social, cultural, and recreational activities; it promotes economic development; and it links local businesses to the global marketplace. The transportation system is, however, severely stressed, facing challenges from significant growth in freight and passenger traffic, spiraling construction and fuel costs, an aging population, and increased international trade.

Transportation professionals, with input from the public, must repeatedly assess the mobility needs of its citizenry so that they can plan and complete projects that will accommodate related needs in an environmentally, fiscally, and socially responsible manner.

In TransAction II, the North Dakota DOT laid out 12 ambitious, but eminently practical, initiatives for improving and enhancing the state's multimodal transportation system. For those initiatives to become reality, the state must continue to fund projects and programs and to prioritize the use of available funds.

Construction, maintenance, and program operating costs have risen dramatically in recent years. Road builders have found themselves competing with other construction companies for scarce materials, workers, and equipment. Similarly, transit operating costs have risen sharply with the price of fuel.

Federal and state funding support has not kept pace with inflation and growing system demands as identified in the Upper Great Plains Transportation Institute's (UGPTI) 2006 report to the Interim Legislative Committee, *Impacts of Transportation Infrastructure on the Economy of North Dakota*. The costs of preserving the existing system, just taking care of what is already in place, will consume the revenue generated at the state and local levels by user fees and traditional forms of taxation.

North Dakota faces immense and growing costs for needed transportation projects and programs. Therefore, it is more important than ever that transportation organizations reach out to the public and convey to them what services can be provided with available funding and to determine if these services are sufficient to satisfy the public's needs. It is critical that the public becomes aware of what services can be provided so it can provide fully informed and fiscally constrained input to elected leaders and transportation officials concerning desired services.

To remain competitive in the world economy and to sustain a high quality of life for its citizens, North Dakota must ensure that its multimodal transportation system remain safe, effective, and efficient for today's travel and freight movements, as well as for tomorrow's. This project will help ensure that elected leaders and transportation officials understand the demands of its residents, businesses, and tourists.

## **Project Purpose and Goals**

This project is intended to help elected leaders and transportation officials become more informed about the state's transportation and mobility needs and to learn how public policy affects how those needs are accommodated. The project will focus on passenger and freight movements on all transportation modes—highways, public transportation systems, railroads, etc. and would build on the principles set forth in TransAction II. The project team will work under the direction of an advisory committee and in close cooperation with North Dakota's legislative Interim Transportation Committee. This project is designed to be a logical extension of the TransAction II plan and will be coordinated with and further the efforts of the Legislative Interim Committee to study highway funding and transportation infrastructure needs.

The outcome of this project would be a transportation community more informed and aware of how personal and freight mobility is affected by public policy on transportation planning and financing.

Individuals and organizations—the stakeholders affected by the quality and accessibility of the transportation system—would be invited to participate in local and state-level discussions about how best to provide for the state's growing transportation needs.

This project will have immediate and long-term impacts on transportation and freight and personal mobility in North Dakota. An immediate outcome will be a better understanding of transportation-related project, program, and service costs and evolving funding challenges. Related public input concerning funding options is crucial if these challenges are to be addressed before the list of unmet needs and funding shortfalls reaches crisis levels. Given the importance of these projects, programs, and services, this input and newly-gained knowledge will hopefully precipitate subsequent participant involvement in ongoing public policy decision making processes.

## **Work Plan**

A steering committee will be established to provide guidance to the project team. Its 6-9 members will be drawn based on input received from the Interim Transportation Committee. It is envisioned that its members would include individuals from the Interim Transportation Committee, the UGPTI's advisory council, NDDOT, the North Dakota League of Cities, North Dakota Association of Counties, North Dakota Association of General Contractors, Dakota Transit Association, and other key stakeholder organizations.

An agenda will be developed for a series of 8-12 focus group meetings to be held throughout the state. The meeting sites will be carefully selected to ensure the broadest coverage. Sites would likely include the state's largest cities, as well as rural communities and tribal lands. The site selection will be made in cooperation with the Interim Transportation Committee. It is envisioned that attendance at these local meetings would range from 50-100 participants.

These local meetings will be held in January, February, and March, 2008, which are considered optimal months since agriculture and business activities are relatively slow during that period, and the Legislature is not in session. Each meeting will be scheduled

(location, date, and time) so as to draw a high level of participation from individuals and businesses. The meetings will last 5-6 hours and will consist of a series of concise, timely presentations by transportation planners, economists, and business leaders. The presentations will start with a broad global perspective and then narrow to a national perspective, a statewide perspective, and a local perspective. The presentations will be followed by a question and answer period, with the questions being fielded by a panel of transportation policy and funding experts. Participants will be asked for their thoughts, ideas, and suggestions on existing and anticipated transportation needs and related finance options.

The invitation list for each meeting will be devised with the assistance of the Interim Transportation Committee and the steering committee and will include a diverse group of business and community leaders, members of the media, and average citizens. The meetings will be open to the public.

The project team will prepare background materials that will be handed out to each participant. In addition, the Internet will be used to make handout materials and presentations available to those who are unable to attend one of the focus group meetings. Summaries of the discussion at each meeting will also be posted.

These local meetings will lead up to a statewide conference on freight and personal mobility, to be held in Bismarck in the spring of 2008. This will be a 1.5-day meeting aimed at state level policy makers, transportation planners, and stakeholder organizations. The suggestions and ideas put forth by the participants in the local meetings will be a key part of the discussion. Transportation leaders from within North Dakota and from national transportation organizations will be invited to provide perspectives and insights on those suggestions and ideas.

There will be several valuable outcomes from these meetings. Stakeholders should be better informed concerning existing transportation-related projects and programs, project selection processes, and funding sources. In addition, elected officials and transportation officials will have a better understanding of the public's transportation needs and system shortfalls. These meetings should also produce public and industry stakeholders who are anxious to participate in subsequent decision making processes that formulate public policy concerning transportation and the funding of related programs and projects.

## Project Timeline

The project will be completed over a 13-month period, with an assumed starting date of August 2007 and an ending date of August 2008. The following listing outlines specific tasks related to the proceeding discussions:

- Task 1 – Conceptualize project design and desired outcomes. (July-September, 2007)
- Task 2 – Assemble an advisory board of transportation planners, industry personnel, and governmental entities to review the project design and oversee subsequent activities. (August 2007).
- Task 3 – Review proposed project design with the Interim Transportation Committee and the steering committee to ensure compatibility with existing planning efforts; modify as necessary. (September 2007).
- Task 4 – Identify dates and locations of local and state level meetings and make related arrangements. (September-October 2007).
- Task 5 –Develop materials for local meetings and compile list of invitees (legislators, local leaders, transportation users and service providers, etc.). (October-December, 2007).
- Task 6 –Finalize plans and arrangements for local educational and input forums. (November-December, 2007).
- Task 7 - Host local educational and input forums. (January-March, 2008).
- Task 8 – Compile information generated at local forums. (March-April, 2008).
- Task 9 – Host state-level conference to review prior educational presentations, to disseminate input gathered at local meetings, and to encourage attendees to become active participants in public policy decision making processes related to transportation planning and funding. (May 2008).
- Task 10 – Prepare a guidebook to summarize related processes and outcomes. (July-August, 2008).