

**Testimony of Commissioner Joseph F. Marie
Connecticut Department of Transportation
Transportation Committee
November 19, 2009**

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. We have significant and important ground to cover and there have been many developments in recent months on the issues that we will discuss with you today.

The Department of Transportation has been an extremely active organization on many fronts and I must admit that we are stretched somewhat thin in addressing the many complicated challenges both now and in the future. This is true throughout state government. Our resources are limited and we are all trying to do more with less. The Department will need to become more flexible, efficient and streamlined.

I would like to offer some opening remarks and then turn it over to you for questions. I will start by updating you on the status of our American Reinvestment and Recovery Act (ARRA) programs. I will then give you an overview of recent developments related to the New Britain-Hartford Busway and the New Haven-Springfield Rail Corridor.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, I want to commence a substantive dialogue with you about the current state of Connecticut's transportation infrastructure. . . funding realities and the need for intelligent and thoughtful priority setting.

At a hearing last August regarding the ARRA programs, Senator DeFronzo opened the door for this conversation and we are prepared to have an honest and candid dialogue with you about the challenges we collectively must address. Since that time, the revenue picture in the state has taken a turn for the worse and the federal surface transportation act has expired.

I would like to provide some overall context for this discussion which I hope will lead to further healthy and productive dialogue as the future federal act is considered and the implications for Connecticut from both a practical and policy standpoint become more evident.

Connecticut's ARRA Programs

As referenced earlier, you had an informational hearing on August 19, 2009 regarding our program where we discussed our philosophical and tactical approach for choosing projects to be funded under the ARRA Program. In essence, the Department chose projects that addressed significant safety and traffic concerns with an eye towards geographical equity within the state. The intent of the legislation was clearly to jumpstart the economy by getting people back to work quickly. It also called for the creation of "sustainable" jobs. I believe that we have selected projects that achieve this balance.

While the downside to this was a lower level of outlays at the start, we have been gaining considerable momentum in recent months. We knew this from the very start, but chose a long term strategic approach, nonetheless. As of today, we have obligated 97% of the Department's apportionment of highway and bridge funds. The Department will easily achieve its 100% obligation requirement set

forth in the legislation by February of 2010. On the transit side, we have obligated 100% of our funds. We have awarded contracts for new buses and commenced work on the Danbury Centralized Train Control project.

Should you wish, we can provide you with a master list for the ARRA program which demonstrates the start, finish and budgets for each project. I should note that we have already completed 11 projects under the program and that detailed project descriptions for each project are easily found on our website.

The U.S. House of Representatives Transportation and Infrastructure (T & I) Committee has been issuing monthly rankings of all of the states related to the ARRA program. As we expected, Connecticut has steadily risen to the 17th position on the current T & I Report. I must candidly submit to you, however, that I do not feel that this ranking system is a true reflection of state performance under the program.

The objective reality is that each of the 50 states had different needs and priorities and chose to spend their funds accordingly. Not all of those needs, priorities and philosophies were consistent across all 50 states. The true measure of our success on this program must be judged over time on a number of metrics: sustained job creation, timely completion, budget adherence and transportation improvement result.

New Britain – Hartford Busway

Let me start by acknowledging that there is a genuine sense of frustration that has been shared by several members of this Committee over the time it takes to get programs from conception to reality. This sentiment is an active part of the dialogue at the federal level and I have been asked recently by senior Federal Transit Administration (FTA) and U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) officials to participate in the national dialogue aimed towards project expediting. I am cautiously optimistic that this will bear fruit and wholeheartedly support the sincere efforts underway within federal DOT to tackle this issue.

The New Britain – Hartford Busway has been many years in the making. It has taken a long time to ripen on the vine. But, as we sit here today, we have made significant strides over the past year and continue to achieve and pass stringent federal performance measures on cost effectiveness, ridership benefits and travel time reductions resulting from this proposed project. On average, the FTA awards maybe one or two Full Funding Grant Agreements (FFGAs) on an annual basis. The process is rigorous and grantees, like us, have to jump over many hurdles and pass rigorous tests before the federal government will sign a Full Funding Grant Agreement under the federal New Starts Program.

Over the past year, we have intensified our outreach efforts to the communities that this regional project will serve. We have had extensive coordination with developers and stakeholders like Central Connecticut State University. We have submitted several important project updates to the FTA and recently achieved a “recommended” status under the New Starts Program. This is no minor feat. We are in line to submit a Full Funding Grant Agreement application by the end of this year.

Through this program, we have the chance to demonstrate the State’s ability to deliver on a regional transit project that will relieve congestion, create jobs, stimulate economic development, improve travel time and air quality as well as provide a public transit option to more than 15,000 riders per day.

The budget for the project has not changed since we submitted our project update to you in November, 2008. We may, indeed, be able to improve on the cost side if the current favorable bidding climate continues. This program is a top priority for this region and we are committed to its success. We are of the opinion that a state commitment to the 20% share of the project will result in a successful application which will bring hundreds of millions of federal dollars to construct this project.

New Haven-Hartford-Springfield Rail Program

This program has been an important priority for the Department over the past year and there have been many developments related to federal policy which have fundamentally impacted our strategic approach and vision for development of this rail corridor.

The Department had been, until recently, developing a program around the findings contained in the report completed by Wilbur Smith Associates in 2005. As you might recall from our hearing last January, the report identified four (4) possible options which ranged from a minimal investment required to establish a nominal level of service to a much more significant investment, including extensive double tracking to establish a commuter rail service frequency of 30 minutes. Fundamentally, the approaches under consideration consisted primarily of establishment of commuter rail service with interspersed intercity service.

Much has changed in the last year as the federal government has taken a fresh and broader approach to rail corridors with particular focus on the advancement of high speed corridors in mega-regions. Recognizing this shift, the Department also has taken a fresh approach and broadened our strategy with the hopes of maximizing our federal funding opportunities in support of the development of this corridor.

This has involved extensive dialogue and discussion with our federal partners – FTA, Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), and Amtrak - and the other New England States. Essentially, we are re-crafting our vision to bring first class intercity and commuter rail service to the Connecticut River Valley. We are exploring the possibility of electrifying the corridor which will allow for a one seat ride from Hartford to New York and points beyond.

While this broader vision has tremendous potential benefit to the state, we have entered some “uncharted” territory as it relates to the completion of the environmental documents. Both the FTA and FRA offer potential funding streams for our program. They have, however, very distinct and different environmental processes. We had positive and constructive meetings in Washington in October aimed at establishing a singular path in our environmental plan which would enable the state to jointly pursue funding for the corridor from both the FTA and FRA.

While we pursue this broader vision and strategy for federal participation, we have advanced a discretionary application under the existing ARRA High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail program that will enable us - if we are successful in securing a competitive grant - to double track a significant section of the existing corridor. We believe that this has independent utility and will ultimately benefit the state as we advance towards more robust service on this important corridor.

In the end, we are cautiously optimistic about the prospects for the development of this corridor and remain committed to, at the very least, commuter rail service on this line. It is our firm belief this

corridor fits well into the strategic rail vision that has been outlined by the Obama Administration and will serve as a viable inland alternative to the already congested Northeast Corridor.

Our Preservation Challenge

I want to start this final section of my opening remarks by acknowledging the tremendous measures that have been taken in recent years by Governor Rell and the General Assembly in the overall commitment to our state's transportation infrastructure. As it relates to our roads, bridges, public transportation system, airports . . . across all modes we have made much progress. We have initiated major programs that will have significant benefit to our state for many decades to come . . . the Bradley International Airport terminal . . . new M-8 Rail Cars . . . the Q-Bridge Program . . . rail service expansions . . . New Haven Rail Yard . . . the list is long. We have come a long way, but the path forward towards the continued health and safety of our transportation infrastructure system is long and will require continued vigilance and attention.

Over the past 18 months, I have had the opportunity to travel to every corner of this state. I like to roll up my sleeves and get my hands dirty. I enjoy getting around the state and talking to anyone . . . anywhere about their transportation challenges and aspirations. In recent months, we have had candid and honest dialogue with stakeholders around the state regarding important transportation projects in their regions. Some of these meetings have been well documented and publicized and included members of Congress, state legislators, regional planning organizations, city and town chief elected officials and interested citizens.

We have had lengthy meetings focusing on projects ranging from Route 11 in Southeast Connecticut, I-84 expansion in Waterbury, Route 7 in Southwestern Connecticut . . . I could go on. These conversations are inextricably linked to the development of the regional Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) and Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP).

We are required by the federal government to develop a "financially constrained" STIP. In the development of the current STIP (which is updated every four years and can be amended periodically . . . it is a living/breathing document), we have spoken openly with our regional partners of the need to take the notion of "financially constrained" very seriously. This has not always been the case in Connecticut.

While unpleasant and difficult, I strongly believe that we must show restraint and be more disciplined in the development of the STIP. In the past, it has contained a "wish list" for every project conceivable in the state. We must be more disciplined. Including projects that have little real chance of being initiated during the period covered by the STIP sets false expectations.

Let me be clear, I am not suggesting that the project mentioned above do not have their merits. A strong case can and has been made for these projects . . . but we must balance the financial requirements of these projects against what we can afford.

The reality today is that we have major obligations ahead of us and tremendous uncertainty related to federal reauthorization and a concurrent state budget crisis.

To put things in perspective, let me give you an example: Thirty-two projects that were in the current program for CRCOG (Capitol Region Council of Governments) have been dropped for 2010, equaling

\$284 million. What can get accomplished in the future will be drastically different than current expectations. Accordingly, we have begun the dialogue with regions.

Last week, I met with my fellow New England Commissioners and it was clear that we share the same problems. We have the oldest infrastructure in the nation, the most difficult climatic conditions, the highest percentages of functionally deficient and obsolete bridges . . . and despite tremendous investment in all New England states . . . we have overwhelming, unfunded preservation needs.

If we are to assume a stable level of federal funding for the next federal reauthorization bill (which covers a five-year period), Connecticut has more than \$2.5 billion in unfunded roadway and bridge programs and more than \$1.2 billion in unfunded needs on our transit infrastructure. I must point out that the latter figure does not include potential modernization and improvements recommendations that might be made as a result of the ongoing analysis of the branch lines or the NHHS Line.

The sky is not falling. I believe that the federal government understands that the state of the nation's infrastructure is a national challenge. The House T & I Committee's reauthorization blueprint holds great promise as it relates to funding levels for both highways and bridges as well as public transit. There is general recognition and acknowledgement that America's transportation infrastructure needs an infusion which is vital to the economic health of the nation. However, a major battle looms on how to pay for it and it is unlikely that this matter will be settled any time soon; and, in the meantime, the infrastructure challenges are likely to increase.

Connecticut is not alone. While we have made progress, much work remains. The current condition, performance and backlog of work will keep us very busy in the years ahead. The need to preserve our existing infrastructure, particular on the road and bridge side, must and will be a guiding core value for our state. Failure to do so would be tantamount to squandering the investment that previous generations have made and worked so hard to achieve.

In closing, there is a lot of information and analysis behind the broad statements that I have made today. We have attempted to base our analyses on sound engineering and life cycle principles. In a few weeks, we will present this information and our recommendations for priorities to the Governor and the General Assembly.

I wish to emphasize that we fully understand that our role is to "advise" the Governor and General Assembly. The Department's submission should be viewed within this context. We expect it to be a starting point for further dialogue about our challenges and how they can be met.

Thank you for your attention today and I look forward to your questions.