

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Opening Statement at Senate Commerce Committee Hearing entitled “Nomination Hearing”

Witnesses: Ms. Polly Trottenberg to be Deputy Secretary of Transportation
March 3, 2021

CANTWELL: Good morning everyone. Today we are considering the nomination of Polly Trottenberg to be Deputy Secretary of Transportation. The Deputy Secretary is the number two spot at the Department of Transportation and plays a critical role in ensuring the safety and security of our nation's transportation system. Ms. Trottenberg is eminently qualified for this role, after 30 years of transportation expertise already under her belt. Most recently, with the city of New York as Transportation Commissioner from 2014 to 2020. I think she has a great understanding of our nation's transportation needs.

She helped implement the country's first “Vision Zero” traffic safety program. Vision Zero is an ambitious idea that will help us tolerate and prevent basically unwanted deaths in our streets, by having better systems. And is a tireless advocate for equitable and important transportation projects throughout our major cities. US Department of Transportation will be familiar with Ms. Trottenberg, as she served in the Department of Transportation from 2009 to 2014, first as Assistant Secretary for Policy and later as Under Secretary for policy, the third ranking official at DOT. And in those important roles she was responsible for implementing legislation, developing key transportation initiatives, including starting up the TIGER grant program, now known as the BUILD discretionary grant program. And I can just tell you already that a lot of the questions I'm going to have is going to be around freight and major transportation infrastructure investment that our economy in the Pacific Northwest depends on, so thank you for your leadership there.

And as a testament to her success of the Department Secretary Ray LaHood, Ms. Trottenberg's former boss is also going to be joining us today to discuss, probably via the web, your expertise, and his support for you. So we are certainly welcoming him back to this committee and thank him for all of his leadership particularly, I would like to thank him for his leadership on moving freight.

In addition to her work in Congress, in 2008 Ms. Trottenberg became the first executive director of Building America's Future, a non-profit organization that supported increased investment in infrastructure and major transportation policy reform. And obviously, your great educational background. We're so excited to have you here in a leadership position.

Our nation's state Departments of Transportation are estimating \$50 billion dollars in revenue losses over the next five years due to COVID-19. So, our airports have lost over \$23 billion from a reduction from traveling public. Our transit agencies have lost \$50 billion in revenue as of 2021, something you can probably speak directly to. And in the state of Washington, we are facing a \$1.14 billion in transportation revenue loss over the next 10 years as a result of the COVID pandemic. So, I can tell you that, that story now with a story that is going to come out today, the American Society of Civil Engineers who are basically going to say, this is the investment America needs to make in transportation or our economy through GDP is going to lose trillions of dollars. So we have the COVID story of lost revenue, and we have assessment by

our civil engineers saying we need much more investment in transportation infrastructure. So facing this economic outlook it's critical that we have someone with Ms. Trottenberg's leadership and expertise to help us in the transportation sector. Of course, in the pandemic we will need to get people moving, that includes Amtrak and the airlines and the aviation sector overall, and certainly support workers who are just trying to get to and from their work in their daily lives. So, all of this is a difficult task, but we know that you're up to it.

I want to mention a couple of things that I believe are critical to our infrastructure in the future. In my state, Sound Transit is in the midst of one of its biggest expansions in the nation really, and it faces a billion dollar shortfall in budget, also impacted by COVID and the loss of local investment that taxpayers would have normally been putting into the system. And due to the pandemic, we see the challenges that it will face and really completing this project at has been imagined. There's also many freight projects in the Northwest and places like the West Seattle Bridge, which suffering from critical cracks in the concrete infrastructures made it unsafe to make our ports as cost effective as they could be in delivering freight. And so we need to have a backup, we're talking about moving not just products from the Northwest but products throughout the United States, from the Midwest, who come through our ports to travel to Asia. So there are many other examples of major investments, whether it's the Columbia River crossing, or the Trussell in Everett, there are many examples where we in the Pacific Northwest need to keep people moving. That that investment will mean job growth and help our economy in the future. So, I look forward to having a chance to ask you questions but more importantly, I look forward to having you confirmed and over the Department of Transportation, so we can get to work on these many issues. Now I'll turn to my ranking member for his opening statement, Senator Wicker.

Q&A With Witness

CANTWELL: Ms. Trottenberg, thank you so much for that statement, your willingness to serve, and again for your work over many years here in the Senate and working in the Department of Transportation.

So I have a basic question we asked all nominees: if you are confirmed, will you pledge to work collaboratively with this committee, provide thorough and timely response to our requests for information, and work together to address important policy issues?

TROTTEBERG: I pledge to do so.

CANTWELL: Thank you. I mentioned Sound Transit. I think this is a good place to start, given your past years of experience. We're experiencing a billion dollar shortfall. The problem is, you know, this program originally was intended to build a spine, up and down Puget Sound from Tacoma to Everett, and, obviously, various things have changed along the [AUDIO CUTS OUT]...has left us with a big shortfall. And so, [AUDIO CUTS OUT]...to be connected. So do you believe we need to provide additional transit agencies nationwide with revenues to help deal with the shortfall from the pandemic? What do you think we can do to help give tools to these agencies so they continue their important work and make sure these projects are completed?

TROTTEBERG: Thanks for that question, Madame Chair. And look it's no question the pandemic has had a devastating effect, not only on the transit agencies in big cities like Seattle and New York, but in rural transit agencies too. The plummeting ridership, the need to invest in more sanitation protocols and cleaning protocols, and workforce protection has left a lot of transit agencies reeling. I know that Congress has already, in some of its relief packages, taken some great steps to help the transit agencies recover. I think we will probably need to continue to work together on that. We certainly, just as you're mentioning in Sound Transit, we don't want to see important capital projects derailed for all these systems all over the country, it would be very hard to come back and make up that last ground. And I know the department has a role to play in making sure we help to keep these projects moving to be as efficient and streamlined as we can so we don't lose ground.

CANTWELL: Thank you. We must also address multimodal freight bottlenecks such as the West Seattle bridge replacement, the I-5 bridge replacement which connects Washington and Oregon, the Apple Capital Loop in Wenatchee. These are major infrastructure investments that also need support. So do you support increasing the freight infrastructure program or lifting the caps that they have on the limits of multimodal projects?

TROTTEBERG: I certainly do, Senator—something we actually got to work together on in the Obama administration, and, you know, one of the key areas that bring together so many parts of the country I think during the pandemic. Certainly it hit home for all of us how absolutely crucial our supply chain was, our need to move freight, to make sure we were keeping our supermarket stocked, our industries moving in these challenging times. You know, really look forward to working with you all on that. I think there's a lot more we can do to strengthen the nation's freight network and make sure we sort of remain in a position of, you know, dominant global competitiveness when it comes to our supply chains.

CANTWELL: A related issue I believe is at-grade crossings. We have 128,000 public railroad crossings in the United States, 62% of which are in rural communities, and they are also a gateway to moving these products. Do you think we need to make some changes and dedicated funding to help relieve some of the block--challenges we're facing with safety and capacity at our railroad crossings?

TROTTEMBERG: I would certainly like to work with you all on that. I mean I know there are two elements particularly as, you know, freight movement on trains, the trains have gotten longer, and that poses both safety challenges, and we are still losing too many lives in this country at grade crossings. And also just for communities bisected by those long freight trains and how that can slow down travel and impact emergency responses, so yes, certainly an area we should work together and make investments.

CANTWELL: And one of our other issues we have to deal with is obviously the impact on transportation on our salmon population in the Northwest. So as we're building highway projects, we want to make sure that the environmental impacts of these infrastructures are also considered so I hope you'll work with us on those issues and continuing the efforts of mitigation.

TROTTEMBERG: You have my commitment to do so.

CANTWELL: Thank you.