

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation Executive Session and Nominations Hearing

Witnesses: Max Vekich to be a Commissioner of the Federal Maritime Commission; Christopher Coes to be Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy, DOT; and Laurie E. Locascio, to be Under Secretary of Commerce for Standards and Technology, DOC.

October 20, 2021

Executive Session - Opening Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Cantwell: Good morning. The Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee will come to order. As we're waiting for members to come in, I'm going to go ahead and announce our Executive Session, which we'll proceed to directly and then to a hearing afterwards.

But we're here to consider the nomination of three individuals for the Department of Transportation, Commerce, and Federal Maritime Commission in that session. During this Executive Session, we'll be voting on nominees who fill positions at the Department of Transportation, Consumer Product Safety Commission, Department of Commerce, as well as important Coast Guard promotions. To begin with, we'll be voting on the nominations of Amitabha Bose, Meera Joshi, Victoria Wassmer, and Mohsin Syed, who have all been nominated for positions within the Department of Transportation.

Amitabha Bose has been nominated to be the Administrator of the Federal Railroad Administration. In his role, he will leverage his nearly two decades of public service. Ms. Joshi is nominated for the Federal Motor Carrier Commission. And Ms. Wassmer is nominated to be the Chief Financial Officer of the Department of Transportation. If confirmed, Ms. Wassmer will bring considerable experience in the financial acumen to manage the department's budget. Mr. Syed is nominated to be the Assistant Secretary for Government Affairs at the Department of Transportation. Mr. Syed brings to this position a long career in public service with positions the Department of Commerce for the House Committee on Transportation Infrastructure on this Committee. I look forward to working with these nominees to improve safety and encourage innovation.

And next we have Mary Boyle, who has been nominated to be Commissioner of CPS, where she will be charged with helping the Commission protect American consumers from risk of injury and death from consumer products. Ms. Boyle currently serves as executive director for the CSPC and has served for more than 10 years in a senior position at that agency. Her experience and commitment to children's safety issues will be critical as the commission tackles the changing marketplace and increasing availability of new and sometimes hazardous products.

We will also vote on the nomination of Rear Admiral Nancy Hann to be Director of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Commissioned Officer Corps and the Officer of Marine and Aviation Operations. Currently, the Deputy Director, Admiral Hann brings nearly three decades of NOAA experience into this position. If confirmed, she'll be only the second woman to fill this critical role where she'll be charged with leading the nation's uniformed officers. She'll also be responsible for administrating and implementing new workforce issues and job training.

Finally, we'll be voting on important Coast Guard promotions, including 69 new captains. Rear Admiral James Kelly, who has been nominated to be the Director of Coast Guard Reserve, where he has served admirably for decades.

Nominations Hearing - Opening Remarks

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Cantwell: We'll now turn to today's Commerce Committee hearing to consider the nomination of three individuals that will play critical roles in the advancing of our nation's core infrastructure and enhancing the resiliency of the supply chain.

I want to welcome the nominees and their families so if they could come up to the dias and take a seat. First, we'll consider the nomination of Dr. Locascio who has been nominated to be the Department of Commerce Under Secretary of Standards and Technology, and who serves as the Director of the National Institute of Standards and Technology, or NIST. Dr. Locascio, welcome to you and your family. Senator Cardin will be providing a formal introduction. But I would also like to add a few words.

NIST's portfolio of work is expansive. In setting standards for weights and measures, it helps to provide common understanding of how to measure time weight and to ensure the safety of consumer products. NIST also provides critical guidance to companies on how to ensure cybersecurity and is tasked with establishing new government industry semiconductor research initiatives.

The impact that our weakened supply chain has had on the semiconductor industry has exposed the need to reestablish manufacturing of most advanced semiconductor products in the United States so we cannot afford to be dependent on other countries to access this critical technology. The United States Innovation and Competitiveness Act, USICA, which I mentioned earlier, was passed in the Senate and included support for our domestic semiconductor industry and Dr. Locascio recently served as the Vice President of Research for the University of Maryland, where she was a professor and oversaw a billion dollar interdisciplinary research organization. With 30 years of service, including a division as the Chief in Biochemical Sciences, I look forward to learning more about your work and the things that we have to tackle at NIST as we move forward in a very, very competitive environment.

Next, we will consider the nomination of Max Vekich, who hails from the state of Washington, to be the Commissioner of the Federal Maritime Commission. The Federal Maritime Commission is a critical, independent federal agency that has the responsibility for ensuring that our ocean shipping and commerce remains fair and competitive. The importance of this commission and the role that our nominee will fill is especially important in the light of overwhelming congestion at our ports.

Port congestion is causing challenges not only for US exporters attempting to bring their products to market, but also to companies trying to get imported goods off of ships and into the US economy. The perspective and experience that Mr. Vekich will bring to this position of Commissioner is needed in this moment. He has a unique career first serving as a member of the Washington Legislature, followed by a long career as a longshoreman in Grays Harbor and in Seattle. And welcome to you and your wife, Marcy. We're glad you're here to take on this challenge.

Mr. Vekich knows port and shipping communities firsthand. He spent his life working in the maritime industry, and knows the challenges faced by the maritime and intermodal transportation system. And I know he understands the importance of what a maritime economy is to the State of Washington's economy, and knows how important it is to our national economy as well.

Finally, we have the consideration the nominee of Christopher Coes to be Assistant Secretary for Policy at the Department of Transportation. Mr. Coes, welcome to you and your family. The Assistant Secretary of Policy serves as key role in the development implementation of the department's surface transportation policy initiatives. The position will be critical in implementing provisions of the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, particularly the new multimodal freight initiatives created by this committee. And if confirmed, will also be an important advisor in aviation policy, especially the review of airport infrastructure programs.

So Mr. Coes currently serves as the Acting Assistant Secretary for Transportation Policy, previously served as the Vice President for Land Use and Development at Smart Growth America, where he worked to build equitable and sustainable communities.

In addition to his decade in this field, he will also bring a wealth of experience in transportation, community development, and organizational development. So thank you to all the nominees for your willingness to serve. I also want to thank Senator Cardin for being here, but I'm going to now call on the Ranking Member, Senator Wicker for his opening statement.

Question and Answer with the Nominees

[\[AUDIO\]](#) [\[VIDEO\]](#)

Cantwell: Thank you, Dr. Locascio. And I'm going to start with you. Senator Wicker, and I worked on legislation directing this to grow the Regional Alliances and Multi-stakeholder Partnership Stimulation (RAMPS). We are looking at this shortage that we have in a cyber-workforce and however, the program was not in the President's budget request. If confirmed, will you commit to helping us address the over 400,000 person gap in cybersecurity workforce and reviewing programs like RAMPS?

Locascio: Thank you for that question, Senator. It's clearly important and NIST does a lot of great work in cybersecurity and has programs to develop the next generation of cybersecurity experts. My son, in fact, one of my sons, was also retrained as a cybersecurity expert here today. So yes, absolutely, I would agree. It would be a pleasure of mine to work with this committee to try to address that very important gap for this country.

Cantwell: And obviously, our committee is having lots of hearings about privacy and data security. What role do you think NIST can play and better helping us define standards that would help in getting people to understand what we should be doing to better protect individuals' data?

Locascio: Thank you for that question, Senator. NIST has recently developed the privacy framework modeled after what they had done with the cybersecurity framework. And that effort of course, was done as NIST always works in partnership with industry and other agencies in the community to come up with the right approach that can be readily and easily adopted. And if confirmed, I would be happy to continue along that course, to make sure that the US has the appropriate means by which to protect our security.

Cantwell: Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Coes, there's probably not a subject area of infrastructure that doesn't matter to the State of Washington right now. Aviation for sure, and obviously, moving forward on the bipartisan infrastructure bill, which includes many investments in air transportation, but I also wanted to draw your attention to a program that we've authorized there as it relates to fixing culverts and things that impact our streams.

What can you tell us about getting, once this legislation is passed, getting that culvert removal replacement and restoration program implemented quickly?

Coes: Thank you for that question, Senator. And again, thank you for your leadership on the success of getting that program included in the bill. If passed, I can tell you right now that the department is working tediously to begin the implementation process of that program, as well as the success of the other provisions within the bill. If confirmed, I will look forward to working with your staff to make sure that program is a success.

Cantwell: Thank you. Mr. Vekich, you mentioned your children being longshoreman as well. Obviously, it's not lost on many of us that we have a longshoreman gap, that we need more people to join the ranks. What is it that you can tell us about what we need to do to get more people in in the workforce for the maritime sector?

Vekich: I contributed two children, and now a daughter-in-law is training today to enter the workforce of the union as well. We have to talk about the need for more people in the maritime industry. We have to push this through the education system, through vocational schools, mainly word of mouth, but these are great jobs.

My generation is almost gone. We were the big demographic on the waterfront labor force. But we need their replacement when their children to step up, we need to recruit in all the communities who have needs for employment, and we need to do a better job of recruiting to the education system.

Community college in our state are really valuable and really powerful tools for reemployment and vocational training. Better utilization of those, I think, would be a big help. In Des Moines, Washington, they have a maritime High School they're starting up. I mean, I'd say it's great, but also I say it's about time. So we are paying for the sins of lack of preparation in making the supply chain resilient and redundant. And it's part of the infrastructure. And I think that's how we ought to approach training and retraining.

Cantwell: Thank you and then to President Biden's request to work 24 hours, so you know the process. I mean, obviously, don't we have a current shortage right now that in the workforce?

Vekich: Despite the current shortage, and I don't know where you're going to find a million truck drivers, that's not my lane. But I tell you, my people that I've worked with, they're willing to work 24/7 if given the opportunity. The Port of LA, Long Beach, cargo is up 30% from last year. That's with the pandemic and that's with port congestion.

And you know if port congestions on the West coast, that's one end of the supply chain. There are problems all the way through the supply chain. But I believe the 24/7 thing, longshoremen love to hear that. Marine clerks love to hear that. We love the concept, but we've always been aware that if the customers don't want to move the cargo at night, and if they don't want to have trucks driving and warehouses open, it's not going to be realistic.

So if those things can be put into place and maybe President Biden's proposal will accomplish that, and that's a positive thing because, Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, we got to move cargo.

That's what we got to do. And when I was a longshoreman and first came to the docks, the whole point was, "keep that cargo hook moving." That's what I was taught and I think it still applies today. You have to move cargo and keep it moving. When cargos sitting still, that's a problem.

Cantwell: Thank you.