

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Floor Speech on Pete Buttigieg Nomination Vote

February 2, 2021

CANTWELL: Mr. President I come to the floor today to support the nomination of Pete Buttigieg to be Secretary of Transportation. We all know the nominee as Mayor Pete, a man who basically came onto the national stage as a Midwest mayor, who had lots of enthusiasm for making investments in America's future. So today we're considering his nomination to be Secretary of Transportation at a time when we need a lot of work done on transportation. And in my opinion, he's a young, energetic mayor who is going to help us usher in a new era of transportation.

That means there's going to be a lot of bipartisan dialogue about how we get there, but this job should not be underestimated in the importance that the transportation sector and the investments for the future need. That is that our transportation system serves as a backbone of our economy, and when it's not doing well, the consequential impacts of that affect our economy. It affects how our businesses compete in a global economy, it affects how people get to and from work, and it affects their home life as well.

So it's a big job that we have, and I know that this mayor and future Secretary of Transportation understands how big this challenge is. We've under-invested in our infrastructure for decades. In the past 10 years alone, we've underfunded our infrastructure needs by \$1.5 trillion dollars. The American Society of Engineers estimates that we need to invest \$5.6 trillion in our infrastructure over the next two decades, or the United States stand to lose about \$10.3 trillion in GDP.

I know this because my state knows this. I think the presiding officer knows this as well. If the transportation infrastructure doesn't work, goods and services don't get through your ports, they don't get to their destination, and businesses choose other vehicles or other avenues for the products to be delivered. America needs to be competitive. And the American public also knows that poor infrastructure and the problems that they see in their communities have to be addressed. Whether that's concrete crumbling off of bridges, delayed trains, buses, congestion, railroads, or any of the many issues. Just this week, a highway in California slid into the ocean, disrupting traffic along the famous Highway 1. And this could be a delay for month.

I know, again, the presiding officer understands this, as well as the State of Washington. Mother Nature doesn't always comply with our transportation needs. So while these investments and numbers may seem huge to people, it is what this investment will enable that we need to keep focused on. We need to focus on the fact that the United States makes and grows things, and we need to get them to their destinations. We need people to be able to get to their place of employment.

So we need someone at the Department of Transportation who is enthusiastic about taking on these challenges and helping President Biden administer a new era of transportation and the challenges that we face. Mayor Buttigieg—a Harvard graduate, Rhodes Scholar, former United States reservist, who I believe served in Afghanistan—also understands the challenges of small town mayors and the things that transportation systems, and the impacts they can have.

He knows the challenges we now face because of COVID-19. That there is a new burden on our transportation system because of the impacts of lost revenue. State departments of transportation estimate \$50 billion in lost revenues over the next five years, airports have lost of \$23 billion because of people no longer flying, transit agencies have lost an estimated \$50 billion by the end of 2021.

So these losses will continue to compound until we find the best way to protect our transportation workers, our travelers, and continue to help with personal protective equipment, testing, vaccines, clear health-based protocols to help return safety to our transportation system and public confidence. That is one of the reasons why we're fighting so hard for this next package of investments.

President Biden took decisive action by mandating that people wear masks, which is a giant forward in our transportation system.

I think there's more we can do and hopefully our colleagues can work together on that. The long term revenue outlet for transportation also is changing and so it will be a long time before its recovery.

So I believe that the Mayor Pete Buttigieg is the right choice for this job because he was Mayor of South Bend, he dealt with infrastructure where the rubber meets the road, managing state, federal, and local resources, to help build infrastructure in his community. He also helped facilitate public-private partnerships for the dollars to go further, and important models for future investments in transportation.

One of those projects, the South Shore Double Track Project, whose full funding grant agreement was signed earlier this month, is like many other state and local projects. The South Shore Double Track demanded impressive coordination between the federal, state and local governments to bring it to fruition. Mayor Buttigieg's Smart Street Initiative also shows he knows how to operate and succeed in a current environment and will be able to help communities around the country replicate the success that he had at South Bend.

He won't be the first mayor to be the Secretary of Transportation, but I think we can say that when you have a mayor in that job, they're going to pay attention to local transportation infrastructure investment to help our communities continue to grow and be competitive.

We have a major opportunity, I believe, to now deliver on infrastructure needs of many of those communities. We should start immediately by talking about infrastructure packages and working on the transportation infrastructure plan for the 21st century, because it's clear we have opportunities this year with the surface transportation programs expiring in September. Communities everywhere are demanding that we help work on these important issues for their communities.

But Mayor Buttigieg will also be called on thinking about the new areas of transportation and how we maintain our competitiveness. He will have to think about issues of ensuring safety with new autonomous vehicle technologies and unmanned aircraft. He'll have to promote stronger emission standards for automobiles, aviation, and maritime industries. He'll have to support the continued growth of electric vehicle infrastructure. He'll have to make big investments in game-changing projects that will help us move freight more cost effectively through our nation. People

will want to know and understand what our reliable passenger rail and transit systems, and the investment in bridges, are going to be for the future.

So all of this are a big challenge, but I know that this nominee is up to that challenge. He did well at the committee and making sure that people understood that he believes that those challenges need to be addressed for America, continue to move forward. From my perspective, just in the State of Washington before COVID had really hit, we saw 78 hours per year of delayed traffic. That is, the average commuter spent 78 hours in delayed traffic. A recent study in my state estimated that Washingtonians lost more than \$7.4 billion dollars each year in lost time and wasted fuel due to congestion, deteriorated roads, and safety problems. As America starts to head back to the office, no one wants to spend time back in that world of congestion. And so we need to make critical investments.

People in Puget Sound know that we need to fix the West Seattle Bridge. They know in Southwest Washington that the Columbia River needs a new bridge across I-5. In Eastern Washington, they know that we need a North-South Corridor. And in Everett, they know that the trestle needs replacement if goods from Eastern Washington are going to get to the Port of Everett and out the door. All of these things are investments, and with them come the structures of things like at-grade crossings, passenger rail systems, and safety that are huge, I believe, infrastructure investments that have not been quite appreciated.

I was very pleased to get Mr. Buttigieg's commitment during our session with him that these things, at-grade crossings, ports competitiveness, and moving products safely should be a big priority for the future. The Lander Street Project in Seattle, which was an investment of the new freight program, was just a few blocks. But literally, congestion for hours had stopped traffic from getting from I-5 to the Port of Seattle.

The Lander Street, in a lot of ways, represents what it really is—a bridge to the future. A bridge to get people moving where they need to go, and the right investment, being competitive for the future. Well we're going to face many more delays if America doesn't remain competitive. So I look forward to working with Mr. Buttigieg on all of these issues.

He also, during the committee hearing process, committed that he will continue to work with Senator Wicker and I on the important issues of aviation safety. He committed to us that he understood that aviation safety and the FAA need to continue to make reforms. I believe that if you want to be the leaders in aviation, you have to be the leaders in aviation safety. And I think Mayor Buttigieg gets and understands that that will be a very big job of the Department of Transportation as well.

So Mr. President, I enthusiastically support this nominee. I look forward to the type of focus that he can give to the Department of Transportation. This area of our government right now needs to address the COVID crisis, it needs to help us plan for a better transportation system of the future, and it needs to understand that this transportation infrastructure and investment in these changes in these sectors of cars and planes and passenger systems are all very dynamic changing industries. And so our competitiveness will be at stake as well.

So I encourage my colleagues to support this nominee. I'm sure we will hear a lot of discussion from him and a lot of bipartisan effort to help get our transportation system fully funded.

With that, Mr. President, I yield the floor.