

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Floor Speech on COVID Relief, Transportation Sector

February 4, 2021

CANTWELL: Mr. President, I come to the floor today to support a budget resolution and underscore the need for us to keep moving forward on helping the American people during this pandemic. It's clear to me from the people of the Northwest that we have to do more to help them, whether it's vaccines, more PPE equipment, helping our small businesses, continuing to move through this process. It means helping to also understand the individuals most hard hit by the pandemic and sectors of our economy most hard hit. It means helping to put kids back into school. It means making sure that we fund the E-Rate program and do more on broadband. And it also means we have to avoid more layoffs, if possible, to help make sure Americans have jobs to pay the bills at home.

So I hope that we can find a bipartisan compromise and move forward on these. There are issues that we have been able to do in the past two COVID packages to get bipartisan support. I hope that our colleagues will continue to look for those paths, but we have to keep helping the American people. Within the commerce jurisdiction—and I know some of my colleagues from the committee are going to come out here and talk today—we've really focused on the issues of our transportation sector and how hard hit our transportation sector has been.

I know that people see today's headlines even about airlines that are issuing furlough notices so that part of their requirements to do so, but when we have these furlough notices, basically what you are doing is, you are disrupting our transportation delivery system. That is, people who end up getting furloughed end up having to set retraining and re-establish before they can go back to the sector.

So we want to keep our transportation sector moving because, obviously, the movement of goods and services of people are critical to delivering on the pandemic and to helping our economy not suffer even greater economic impact. We've seen how important the transportation sector is, and we've seen even recently out in the West how our dock workers, ILWU and others, have suffered major infection rates of COVID and now start to threaten our delivery of goods and products through those systems. And we need to do more to get them vaccines and to make sure that we're moving Americans' products through our ports as well.

Well, I want to talk about the fact that the aviation sector represents 5% of our G.D.P. That is, 11 million jobs and \$1.6 trillion in economic activity. So the aviation sector is important to us overall and continuing to maintain our competitiveness there and grow to the economy of the future is very critical, so that is why we continue to work for and look for ways to keep the aviation system going during the pandemic, and why we are continuing to move the support for airlines in this—in this package.

Congress has twice acted to provide critical relief to airline workers, pilots, mechanics, flight attendants, and we will continue to do so as part of this budget reconciliation. As I mentioned, avoiding furloughs keeps highly skilled pilots and crew members trained and ready to go as part

of the transportation sector, and as we have seen with this economy, we are now, I think, the sector is back to almost 40% of where it was prior to the pandemic. So helping to preserve that commerce and trade has helped our economy and our U.S. airports who also have been impacted by this, have had continued economic losses, and we want to help them with moving forward on this plan.

We also want to work on a bipartisan basis to do more to help aviation manufacturing that has been greatly impacted by this. The aviation aerospace sector has lost so many jobs, and there are hundreds of thousands more at risk. I know my colleague from Kansas and my colleague from Virginia, Senators Moran and Warner, have been working on a proposal. We certainly want to continue to work on a bipartisan basis to make sure that as much of the aviation workforce that we can keep going, so as we return to the very competitive environment of aviation, that we have a workforce that is skilled there to do it.

We also have to do more to help Amtrak. The revenues of ridership dropped 97% compared to the 2019 riderships. And Amtrak has been forced to furlough over 2,000 employees. It has had to cut essential service on long distance and state routes. Trust me, my colleagues from Montana, Senator Tester and Senator Daines, have brought these issues up. Without additional relief, essential services that connect rural communities will be cut further, and I can tell you in Montana where people go to see Glacier Park and the wonders of that great state, having this essential service is key. So we don't want to do more damage to the economy as we continue to deal with the pandemic by underinvesting in the infrastructure that has to keep operating to help our economy.

So I'm going to continue to work with our colleague Senator Wicker and his efforts on Amtrak and continuing to move forward. And also I know that the—also the impact of transportation on the state budgets that we have seen. In the State of Washington, for example, there's a whole list of projects that are now going to be delayed, are not finished, are not done just because of the loss of revenue from ridership and transportation. So our transportation infrastructure needs to be kept going. The workforce that keeps it going needs to be supported. And that is going to be a key aspect of the next budget reconciliation package and what we're going to work on.

So I hope our colleagues can understand how important that is to our economy, how important it is to the men and women who serve in the transportation sector. And if I could just say, Mr. President, there are so many people in the transportation sector that just went and did their jobs. We've lost lives in aviation. We've lost lives in transit. We've lost lives with dock workers. People have just showed up to continue to do their jobs. And so we need to do better by passing this package, giving them the support, more vaccines, more equipment, more supportive funding so we can keep Americans working in jobs, but working safely. That's what this next package will be about.

And I'll yield to my colleagues who are going to talk about other priorities within this particular sector. I see my colleague from New Mexico on the floor.