

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510-1304

April 29, 2015

The Hon. John Thune  
Chairman  
Committee on Commerce, Science and  
Transportation  
512 Dirksen Senate Building  
Washington, DC 20510

The Hon. Bill Nelson  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Commerce, Science  
and Transportation  
425 Hart Senate Office Building  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Thune and Senator Nelson:

As your Committee begins work on passenger rail reauthorization legislation, I bring your attention to important transportation issues I hope can be incorporated into the Committee's legislation.

This bill will have a significant impact on the transportation network in my state and the country. Dozens of non-partisan commissions, studies and academics have outlined the huge infrastructure deficit facing the nation. Illinois—as the road, rail, and aviation hub of the country—is in dire need of increased investment to upgrade our aging transportation network.

We can make a significant dent in our infrastructure deficit if the passenger rail reauthorization increases investments. Our economic competitiveness depends on having a nation-wide rail network that can move people and goods quickly, safely, and with minimal impact to the environment. Building and maintaining this type of transportation network will require a significant increase of investments over current levels.

In March, the House passed H.R. 749, The Passenger Rail Reform and Investment Act of 2015 (PRRIA). I respectfully urge you to consider the following issues as your Committee considers its rail transportation bill:

**Northeast Corridor Improvement Fund Account/National Network Account**

PRRIA proposes separate lines of business for the Northeast Corridor (NEC) and for the rest of the country. Severing the Northeast Corridor from the rest of America's passenger rail network would put the popular corridor service in the Midwest, especially in Illinois, in jeopardy. This could potentially harm the functionality of the overall system. Without a national network, the system is at risk. Each component—long-distance, state-supported, and NEC—is critical in the whole of this system, and investment in each part is the foundation of expanding a robust system.

Taxpayer funds in Illinois and other Midwest states throughout the years have helped make the NEC successful and profitable. I am deeply concerned about this proposal and look forward to

working with the Committee on a solution that ensures the health and growth of a nation-wide system.

### **The Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing program**

The Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing (RRIF) program provides long-term, low-interest loans for railroad-related improvements. Yet due to certain constraints, this program has been severely underutilized. RRIF has the potential to assist communities with large-scale projects like the redevelopment of Chicago's Union Station. I applaud the provisions in the House bill to expedite and improve the RRIF process and urge the Committee to consider additional steps to make these much-needed loans more accessible. Such investments will greatly improve the flow of traffic and provide significant benefit to the local communities. I look forward to working with the Committee on these changes.

### **State-Supported Route Advisory Committee**

I commend the House for including the provision establishing a State-Supported Route Advisory Committee, which would provide a structured, organized means of determining cost responsibilities. This structure and the proposed timelines would benefit Amtrak and the states through more efficient and effective planning mechanisms. In addition to this Committee, I recommend a provision mandating the inclusion of non-NEC representation on Amtrak's Board of Directors.

### **High Speed Rail and Intercity Passenger Rail**

The investments made in passenger rail included in the Recovery Act have jumpstarted the rebuilding of our aging passenger rail network. This next reauthorization should strengthen and expand the nation's intercity passenger rail network.

The best way to improve our passenger rail network is to provide high speed and intercity passenger rail with a dedicated revenue stream similar to those available to highways, mass transit and aviation. A multi-year commitment of dedicated public investment will spur private investment and support hundreds of thousands of jobs.

States like Illinois need a strong federal partner to bring their passenger rail systems into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I encourage you to enhance the existing discretionary, competitive grant programs for intercity passenger rail to help states achieve that goal.

### **Increased Funding for Amtrak**

Amtrak ridership in Illinois is higher than anywhere outside of California and the Northeast Corridor. Five million people boarded or exited Amtrak trains in Illinois last year, with over 31 million passengers annually passing through Chicago's Union Station. Chicago's Union Station alone serves around 110,000 commuters daily.

Amtrak needs federal assistance to maintain and build on these recent achievements, yet the House bill reduces Amtrak's authorized funding levels by 40 percent. I am concerned that the

authorization levels in the House bill are insufficient and limit the potential investment in Amtrak in future years. I encourage you to include robust authorization levels to ensure Amtrak can grow and expand across the country, especially in Illinois.

### **On Time Performance**

Ridership on Amtrak is at record levels. Amtrak's annual ridership exceeded 30.9 million passengers in 2014. This growth could be even greater if on-time performance of Amtrak trains were improved. Consistent and reliable train schedules are key to attracting and keeping travelers using passenger rail.

Train delays do not just make passengers late and frustrated, they cost Amtrak money. The Department of Transportation Inspector General found improving Amtrak's on time performance to 85 percent would result in a \$136.6 million net gain for the company. This level of savings could be used to modernize tracks and upgrade facilities and equipment across the country. I encourage you to include provisions to improve on-time performance of passenger trains in your bill.

### **Freight Rail Program**

Our economy depends on the efficient movement of goods via an interconnected system of roads, highways, rail and airways. MAP-21 directed DOT to establish a national freight policy, create a national freight plan, and begin collecting the data and information necessary to help improve freight movement throughout the country.

The next rail bill can be an opportunity to expand on these efforts and create a national freight program that includes funding to improve freight mobility while reducing fuel consumption, improving safety and limiting greenhouse gas emissions. This freight program should invest in local mitigation measures to ensure that freight increases do not compromise the safety and quality of life of impacted communities. As the rail bill moves forward, I encourage you to build on the freight policies built in MAP-21 and create a new national freight program.

### **Rail Safety**

Illinois has the second largest rail network in the country, with nearly 10,000 miles of railroad track and 7,737 public at-grade crossings. Federal and state rail safety programs are critically important to our economy and public safety.

The FRA recently announced 2014 was the safest year in railroading history, and total railroad accidents have dropped for seven straight years. However, there is still a lot of work needed to further reduce accidents and fatalities on our rail network. I previously worked with Chairman Rockefeller to request a wide-ranging GAO review of our current rail safety programs. The GAO reported that there are still challenges to implementing rail safety initiatives and identified the need for additional safety inspectors.

We are also increasingly experiencing rail accidents due to extreme temperatures and weather events, including flooding. These weather events are happening more frequently, and we need to start considering policies to ensure the safety and reliability of our rail network during extreme weather events. I encourage you to take these issues into consideration and increase resources to meet these safety concerns.

### **Rail Traffic Mitigation Assistance for Communities**

Shifting more freight to our railways is a cleaner, cheaper and more environmentally friendly way to move goods. However, this increased freight often brings with it increased risks to safety, greater noise and blocked traffic at grade crossings. I encourage you to include programs and policies that will help local communities mitigate the negative impacts of increased freight traffic.

### **Rail Line Relocation**

SAFETEA-LU established a capital grant program to provide financial assistance for local rail line relocation and improvement projects. The rail line relocation program is one of the only grant programs available for communities to mitigate the adverse effects of rail traffic on safety, traffic flow and community quality of life. This program is important to communities in Illinois that have undertaken rail consolidation and mitigation projects. I encourage you to provide a multi-year reauthorization for the rail line relocation program.

Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to working with you to provide our country with a transportation system that will keep us competitive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century economy.

Sincerely,



Richard J. Durbin  
U.S. Senator