STATEMENT OF

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COMMISSIONER
BENTON COUNTY, WASHINGTON

ON BEHALF OF
THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF COUNTIES

ON
MAINTAINING THE NATION'S HIGHWAY AND TRANSIT INFRASTRUCTURE

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON HIGHWAYS AND TRANSIT
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTAITON AND INFRASTRUCTURE

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Good morning Chairman DeFazio, Ranking Member Duncan and Members of the Subcommittee. My name is Leo Bowman and I am a county commissioner in Benton County, Washington. Today I am representing the National Association of Counties, where I serve as Vice Chair of the Transportation Steering Committee. I want to thank you for inviting NACo to this hearing on Maintaining our Nation's Highway and Transit Infrastructure. NACo represents the nation's 3066 counties that own and maintain 1.8 million miles of mostly rural highways, 45 percent of the total highway mileage in the United States, and 256,000 bridges, 44 percent of all the nation's bridges. We also own or participate in the governing authority of about one-third of the transit systems.

To say that counties have an interest in maintaining our surface transportation system is an understatement. NACo members have made a huge investment in this system and much of what county and other local governments do is maintain the existing system For that reason, we agree with the first recommendation of the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission that the national interest is best served when transportation facilities are well maintained. This is certainly true as it applies to the three county region where I serve as the Vice Chair of the Benton-Franklin-Walla Walla Regional Transportation Planning Organization. Our region occupies 4,216 square miles in lower southeaster Washington State. The Columbia, Snake, and Yakima rivers flow through the region and we have the Department of Energy's Hanford Reservation in Benton County.

We have 3700 miles of county roads, of which 650 miles are federal-aid eligible roads, and 330 bridges. Our economy depends on these roads and bridges being well maintained. Our region produces over $1 billion in agricultural products per year. For these products to get to market cheaply and efficiently, we must invest in our three county mostly rural road and bridge system. Maintaining the system means that upgrading roads and bridges to standards that enable these facilities to handle today's heavier and wider vehicles. Seasonal emergency weight restrictions and closings are a serious problem for our agricultural economy. Our goals are to prevent premature failure and replacement. For roads, maintenance requires resurfacing existing pavement and necessary upgrades. Bridge maintenance includes scour control, corrosion protection and joint sealing.

The other reason maintenance is so important is because of safety. We know that nationally 25,000 people die each year on rural roads, which translates into a fatality rate that is 2.5 times greater than on urban roads.   In our region, broken or damaged roadway components get top priority. Nothing is more important than safety to our county governments and to our elected officials. We hope that undertaking this type of maintenance activity will ensure that our citizens can travel in relative safety on our county system.

Let’s talk about financing our roads and bridges. For our three county region’s county owned road and bridge network, the Regional Transportation Planning Organization forecasts over the next 20 years we will collect $561 million in revenue of which we will spend $356 million on maintenance, which reflect our historic 63-37 per cent split between maintenance and operations and new capacity . Included in this forecast is an every two year evaluation of the collector and arterial roads owned by the three counties. We also have 546 miles of roads which, if we are to maintain them properly and maximize their functionality, are in need of upgrading to current all weather and safety standards. We estimate the cost of undertaking these improvements to be $500,000 to $1 million per mile. While this does sound like a lot of money, our engineering staff has told us that by upgrading these roads we will reduce normal maintenance costs by 80-90 per cent.

Almost all of the revenue counties have for maintenance is property taxes and other local receipts. This is the central issue for county and other local governments when faced with substantial needs on their transportation systems. Unlike the 50 states which have the revenue generated by both the federal and state fuel taxes as dedicated revenue sources for road and bridge needs, local governments rely primarily on our own source revenue. States do share some fuel tax revenue with locals, but the amounts are uneven.

I must be honest in stating that the State of Washington, which has the highest fuel tax among the states, is generous in sharing its fuel tax revenue with counties. However, nationally there are few if any local fuel taxes, relatively few local sales taxes dedicated to transportation, and most counties need to ask the state governments for permission to levy a new tax. As a local elected official for over 11 years, I can tell you that raising property taxes to maintain highways and bridges is often politically unpopular because it is totally unrelated to the usage of the system and our citizens see little connection between better roads and bridges and increasing taxes. I would direct you to a recent publication entitled, **Financing Transportation in the 21st Century: An Intergovernmental Perspective,** which was recently released by NACo and five other state and local governments organizations that describes this issue in detail.

What would help rural counties to maintain our highway and bridge systems? One answer is more federal resources directed to rural roads and the units of government that are responsible for them. The Highway Safety and Improvement Program needs to be targeted to those roads that are unsafe and local government officials need to be part of the process that develops the state strategic highway safety plan, something that current regulation does not allow. This is important because this process determines those projects eligible for funding. Related to this, the High Risk Rural Road Program needs far more funding than the $90 million annually currently available. As I stated earlier, rural roads account for a disproportionate number of highway fatalities. Bridges on non-federal aid roads need more funding and NACo would support an increase of the off-system set-aside to at least 20 per cent. The Surface Transportation Program rural set aside has not been increased since it was instituted in ISTEA in 1991—it needs to be adjusted. We need an enhanced rural planning process that includes a stronger role for local officials. Finally, the project delivery process needs to be streamlined so that delays are reduced and the cost for rural counties to use federal funds does not discourage participation in the federal highway program.

This completes my statement and I would be happy to answer any questions the members of the subcommittee may have.