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"The National Highway System: Moving Us Into the Next Century", Highway Users Federation

Max S. Baucus

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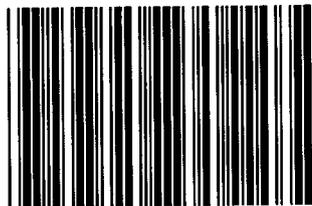
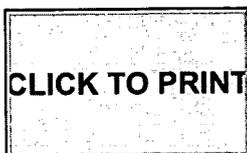
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**"The National Highway System:
Moving Us Into the Next Century"**

**Remarks of Senator Max Baucus
to the Highway Users Federation**

May 19, 1994

We talk a lot about the information superhighway, fiber-optic cable and other high-tech ways to invest in America. That's all to the good. But whether you're a trucker, or a wheat exporter, or a tourist, the time comes when you've got to get in the car and get moving. That's never going to change.

So when people tell you about all the shiny new hi-tech stuff, they all too often forget that roads, ports, railway tracks and bridges are still what gets us from here to there.

We have a lot of issues to deal with this year. In the Finance Committee, we have to pass the GATT implementing legislation and national health care reform.

The Environment and Public Works Committee is just as busy. We have the new Safe Drinking Water Act on the floor this week, the Clean Water Act coming up soon; and reauthorization of both Superfund and the Endangered Species Act on the horizon. We have some time set aside for questions, and I'd be happy to discuss the prospects for any of those bills. I'd like to focus first on the transportation agenda.

The Interstate System

Throughout our history, the wisest of our leaders have recognized how important it is to invest and improve basic infrastructure. The commitment dates all the way back to John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay and the networks of dirt roads and canals they promoted in the first half of the nineteenth century. One young Congressman from Illinois made a name for himself by backing these proposals; his name was Abraham Lincoln.

But we did not make a full commitment to infrastructure until 1956, when President Eisenhower began construction of the Interstate System. His achievement in creating this system was so great that today, very few people ever stop to think about it. It is no exaggeration to say that Eisenhower did as much for us by committing us to the Interstate as he did by leading us in the Second World War.

As a practical accomplishment in engineering and construction, as an economic asset, and as a way for ordinary people to travel, the Interstate network has no rivals. It is the world's largest, safest, and best transportation network. It turns impassable obstacles -- mountain ranges, forests, deserts -- into scenic attractions.

And it ties us to the coast and to our markets abroad. The Interstate network is a direct link from the Montana farm and ranch to the Great Lakes and the Pacific Ocean. It gets our wheat to Russia and our beef to Japan. We would not be viable in the modern economy without it. It is one of the wonders of the world. And if we commit ourselves to maintain and extend the Interstate, it will last, like the Pyramids or the Great Wall of China, for centuries.

The System is Decaying

But that is a big "if." Today, the 45,000 miles of roads that make up the Interstate, and the airports, ports, and railroads it connects, are falling into disrepair. The Transportation Department reports that 65 percent of our highways and roads need fixing, and 45 percent of our bridges are obsolete or deficient. These conditions are sorry evidence of the penny-wise, pound-foolish cuts in funding for maintenance of roads and bridges since 1970.

Our competitors do not take their infrastructure for granted. While we invest less than two percent of our gross domestic product in our

infrastructure, Germany spends 3.7 percent and Japan spends 5.7 percent. If we are to get our goods to market and move our people efficiently, we must do better.

Congress began reversing this trend when we passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991. ISTEA calls for a broader focus and a shift in the way we finance transportation projects. It also coordinates environmental and transportation policies, encouraging federal, state, and local governments to work together.

It also, of course, put a lot of money into the system. To be specific, ISTEA authorized \$151 billion in federal spending for upgrading surface transportation systems over the next six years. But while we're putting a lot of money into the system, it won't be enough unless we are smart and set the right priorities.

The Transportation Department estimates transportation needs to be \$50 billion each year. Frankly, for the foreseeable future we'll have a hard time finding that much new money. And because of that, we must be sure we invest wisely. And ISTEA strives to do that by moving this country beyond the Interstate era to the National Highway System era.

The National Highway System

The law requires us, within the next seventeen months, to approve the successor to the Interstate -- the National Highway System, or "NHS."

The National Highway System, in brief, is the network of critical roads that carry the bulk of our commerce. State governments have cooperated with us in developing it, by identifying more than 159,000 miles of road as the backbone of our transportation system.

These roads make up only four percent of the nearly four million miles of our public roads. As time passes, they will carry over 40 percent of the highway traffic and 70 percent of commercial truck traffic. Given our shortage of federal money, we need to use what funds we have to maintain and improve the most important roads. By identifying the NHS routes, states will help themselves target their money to make sure the highways that get the most use are also the safest and most efficient.

That is exactly what we need to stay competitive. The National Highway System's importance to a successful NAFTA is one obvious example. Almost three fifths of the U.S.-Canada freight and four fifths of the U.S.-Mexico freight moves by truck. And as I said earlier, 70 percent of our trucks use the NHS roads. If we let them decline, we will lose much of what we hoped to get through the NAFTA last year.

NHS and Rural America

The National Highway System is especially vital to rural areas of the country -- areas where highways are the only method of transportation. While we can no longer afford to view our transportation system as a collection of unconnected rail, water and road networks, we also need to keep a focus on the needs of rural areas.

For Western states like Montana, immediate attention to the National Highway System is crucial, because we have no alternative to roads.

In Montana, to paraphrase Vince Lombardi, the highway isn't everything -- it's the only thing. We do not have the mass transit and water transport systems that a lot of other states depend on. We never will have them -- we're a big, dry state with no big cities. Because we're a rural state, highways are critical to our economy, our way of life, and the travel and tourism revenue we depend on.

They are also key to tourism and travel. Many tourists will use some portion of the NHS in the future. By linking population centers with national parks and other tourist attractions, the NHS can help develop areas -- in Montana, throughout the West, and in other rural areas around the country -- that only the blue highways serve today.

The NHS Bill

These ideas are at the heart of the bill I introduced last March, the National Highway System Designation Act of 1994. The legislation is what we call a "clean bill." It isn't loaded up with extra money for pet projects and controversial measures. Sometimes pet projects are good projects. Sometimes controversial ideas raise a fuss because they're new ideas. In most cases, with patience and determination we can go through them one by one and pick out the good from the bad.

However, this year we just can't afford it. We have as heavy a legislative schedule as I can remember lying in wait for us this summer and fall.

There are the regular appropriations bills. There is the GATT legislation. There is the new Clean Water Act, one of the most important environmental laws we have. There is, of course, health care, one of the biggest issues Congress will ever take up. And there is an early end to the session because it's a campaign year.

So we simply do not have time, let alone money, to wade through a river of demonstration projects and hot-button issues. A clean bill is the only kind of bill that will pass. Loading up the NHS bill with extra projects will simply turn it into road kill.

The House marked up a bill in the Subcommittee last week. From an early reading, it includes a lot of controversial items. That will simply make it hard to pass a bill this year.

The National Highway System bill is very important to me. I want to see it pass this year, and I want to see us meet our deadline for identifying the NHS roads. But if people choose to make this law a vehicle to rewrite the parts of ISTEA they don't like, it will have problems. Big problems.

That would be a pity. This bill is in the national interest. Even without pet projects, the bill is going to mean jobs and growth. Take my state: the bill links up a lot of Montana towns -- places like Lewistown, Thompson Falls, Circle, Sidney, Jordan, Broadus, Miles City, Roundup and Malta -- towns that earlier proposals left in virtual isolation.

It also means a future transportation policy that makes good sense. The National Highway System bill emphasizes "intermodal connectivity." For those of us whose vocabulary is limited to the English language, that means using all kinds of transport -- not only highways, but the railroads, waterways and air connections that connect major population centers, border crossings, ports and airports.

If we can keep them in peak condition, we will serve our country well, and make our country more competitive in an increasingly global economy.