

# Open Letter

TO THE NEXT PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

October 10, 2008

The President-Elect  
The White House  
Washington, DC 20500



Dear Mr. President-Elect,

In January, you will assume an enormous burden. Upon taking office, you will face four urgent national priorities: to revitalize the American economy; to reduce our dependence on petroleum; to address the deficiencies of our health care system; and to confront the growing threat of global climate change.

A common theme running through all of these challenges is the vital need to reinvest in America to ensure the future health of our economy, our people and our planet.

It is common in Washington to view challenges of this magnitude exclusively through a national, or even global, lens. I urge you to reject that tendency. As we develop a new strategy to reinvest in America, please also consider the impacts of national policies on families, neighborhoods and communities.

In 1956, President Eisenhower launched the largest public investment program in American history: the creation of the interstate highway system. While this program has contributed greatly to America's prosperity, we have also experienced significant unintended consequences.

For the last 50 years we have created a transportation "monoculture," with driving often the only safe and convenient way to get from Point A to Point B. By designing our communities to ensure the rapid movement of automobiles, we have created places where it is difficult, and even dangerous, to walk or bike. And as walking and biking have become more difficult, driving has become second nature, so embedded in our culture and our behavior that we do it without thinking.

To punctuate this decline in mobility outside the automobile, half of the trips we take are within range of a 20-minute bike ride, and one-fourth are within range of a 20-minute walk. Yet the vast majority of these short trips are taken by car. What are the unintended consequences of a transportation system that offers us little choice but to drive? There are many:

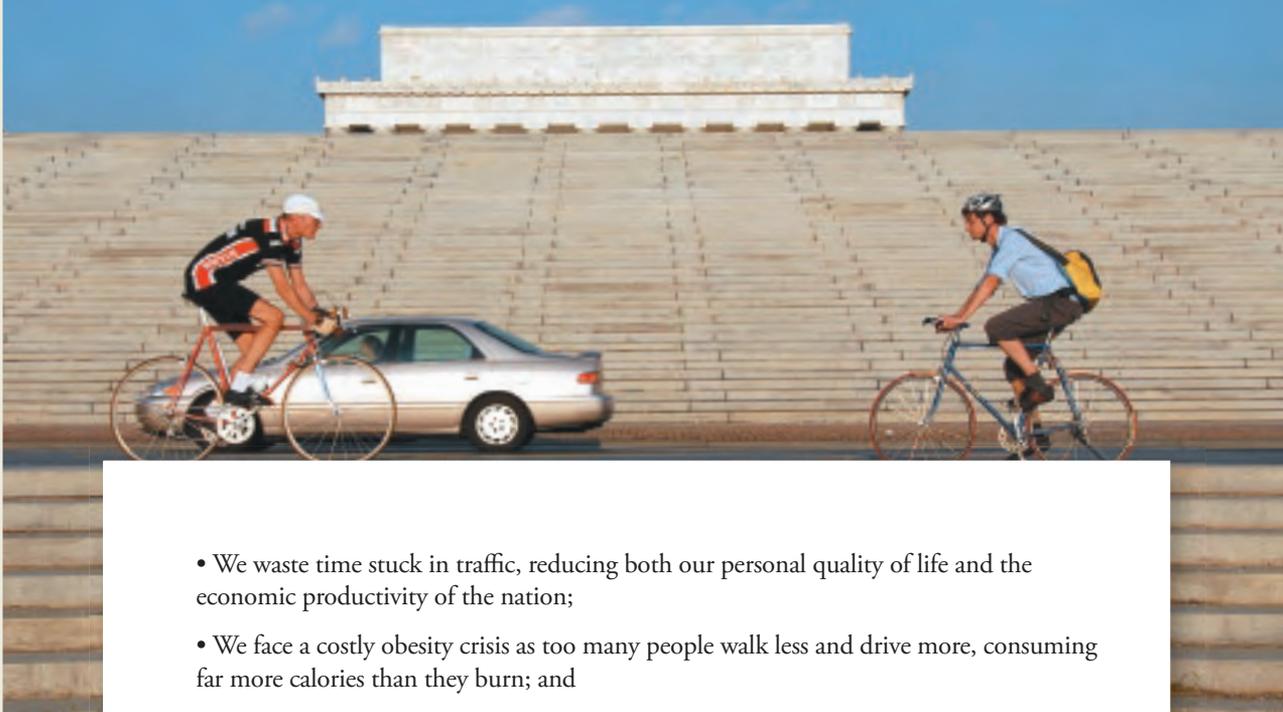
- Family budgets are stretched to the limit to pay for gasoline at \$4 per gallon, while the United States sends hundreds of billions of dollars to oil-producing nations;



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- We waste time stuck in traffic, reducing both our personal quality of life and the economic productivity of the nation;
- We face a costly obesity crisis as too many people walk less and drive more, consuming far more calories than they burn; and
- Our local air is filled with pollution, while greenhouse gases threaten to disrupt global climate patterns.

In the next two years you will likely consider two major pieces of federal legislation that could begin to address these challenges: the reauthorization of the federal surface transportation bill, and new legislation to attack global climate change. With the interstate highway system completed, these bills offer the opportunity to invest in a *new* strategy to create a more balanced and diverse transportation system that will provide Americans a variety of transportation choices.

Central to this new strategy is the need to encourage “active transportation” by creating safe places to walk and bike. By connecting our communities with a seamless network of trails, sidewalks and bike lanes—and linking them to public transportation—we can give people the choice of mobility without an automobile. And for every car trip replaced by a walking/biking/transit trip, we will spend less at the gas pump, easing the strain on household budgets and keeping dollars in America. By reducing traffic congestion, we improve the commutes of those who choose to drive. And by replacing the gasoline in our cars with the energy in our bodies, we will burn calories, not carbon, simultaneously addressing the obesity epidemic and climate change.

To some, a strategy to increase investment in safe places to walk and bike like rail-trails seems inconsequential. They prefer big national actions that promise big national outcomes. But such people fail to grasp the wisdom in the old adage “think globally, act locally.” It is at the local level—with millions of small actions by everyday Americans—that we can change the world from the bottom up. That is the promise of rail-trails and “active transportation.”

In that spirit, Rails-to-Trails Conservancy stands ready to work with your administration to create new policies to reinvest in America and develop healthier people, healthier places and a healthier planet.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Keith Laughlin".

Keith Laughlin, President  
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

BARBARA RICHEY/RTC

