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December 23, 2010

Mr. Robert L. Darbelnet
President and CEO, AAA
1000 AAA Drive
Heathrow, FL 32746

Dear Mr. Darbelnet,

Since my first letter on September 1, prior to Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's petition, I have repeatedly asked you for a meeting to discuss AAA's position on funding for trail, bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure from federal gasoline tax revenues. My requests for a meeting have not received the dignity of a response; they have been simply ignored. That is regrettable.

As a result, our only substantive exchange with a AAA employee concerning our policy disagreement was a brief conversation with Ms. Yolanda Cade as we delivered more than 51,000 names on our petition to your national headquarters last week. I found that exchange particularly unsatisfactory because at no time did Ms. Cade depart from repeating the same talking points that have been used by AAA over and over again in recent months. These talking points do little more than express vague support for walking and biking but never address our central question: Will AAA support the continuation of the federal programs within the Highway Trust Fund that support balanced transportation through trails, walking and bicycling facilities? I can only assume that, given AAA's blanket refusal to answer that question and your November statement to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, the answer is, unfortunately, "No."

Realizing that Ms. Cade was not going to engage in a substantive policy discussion, I expressed the hope that our exchange would at least be the beginning of an ongoing dialogue. I was stunned when she responded that there was no need for additional dialogue because we had already discussed the issue at length. When I indicated that there had been no discussion whatsoever and that you had ignored my multiple requests for a meeting, she flatly denied it.

According to your website, Ms. Cade's expertise is "crisis communications." It is now clear that from the beginning, our request that you reconsider your policy position had



been viewed inside AAA as a public relations crisis to manage, not an opportunity for a policy discussion with a potential ally.

So, Mr. Darbelnet, as a result of AAA's stubborn refusal to issue a meaningful public response to our core question or to engage in a substantive private conversation, I must conclude that AAA is either unable or unwilling to consider the serious implications of its own policy position. It is deeply troubling that AAA would be so close-minded as to casually dismiss the opportunity to discuss transportation policy with transportation policy experts outside the narrow confines of the highway-building lobby. You claim support for your policies from 51 million members, yet refuse to hear from many of those same members when they question the policy position you've taken.

As a result, my wife and I have concluded that we can no longer be a dues paying member of an organization that claims to support America's motorists but functions as a front group to lend legitimacy to a narrow group of special interests. Enclosed you will find my family's membership card, which we have had since 1982.

I can say with confidence that I am not alone. The position that AAA has taken on this policy issue might enjoy support from highway lobbyists in Washington, but it's not popular with people in communities across America who walk, bike and drive. The opinions of the more than 51,000 Americans on our petition—two-thirds AAA members—are just the tip of the iceberg. They represent tens of millions of Americans who use trails and bicycle facilities every year. This isn't 1956 anymore.

Finally, I sincerely regret that AAA has responded in this fashion. I firmly believe that your organization could be instrumental in redefining the role of the automobile in 21st century American communities. So if you should determine that you wish to reexamine your position on these issues at some point in the future, I would still welcome the opportunity to have that discussion.

Best Wishes,

Keith Laughlin, President
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

