January 25, 2021

The Honorable Charles Schumer  The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Majority Leader of the US Senate  Speaker of the House of Representatives

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
Secretary-designee, US Department of Transportation

Majority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi and Secretary-designee Buttigieg:

This year, adverse circumstances have given Congress a once-in-a-generation chance to spur strong economic recovery by making essential investments in our country’s transportation infrastructure. Reauthorization of the federal surface transportation law (FAST Act), the need for economic stimulus to compensate for jobs and revenue lost in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, a climate crisis and the incoming Administration’s Build Back Better proposal converge to create a compelling opportunity to recalibrate transportation priorities and invest in America’s future prosperity.

Your leadership is needed to secure greater investment in transportation infrastructure in 2021 with a focus on unmet needs for connected walking and biking routes protected from dangerous vehicular traffic. It is time to build a transportation system that is safe, clean, healthy, affordable and equitable.

Although much focus over the past year has been on pandemic-induced shortfalls in transit and gas tax revenue, the scourge also prompted a surge in demand for trails and other safe and connected infrastructure for walking and biking. A decade of increases in walking and biking accelerated as trail use rose 60% in 2020 over the previous year and bike sales and repairs boomed. With decreased traffic last spring, streets were adjusted to accommodate the uptick in pedestrians and cyclists. Many Americans already relied on active transportation infrastructure to travel to their jobs, access transit services, address their daily needs and remain healthy. This lifeline of affordable mobility has proven especially important, although inadequate, to accommodate essential workers, communities with low levels of car ownership, and persons unable to drive during this year of altered transportation behavior. The pandemic has spotlighted the need for far more extensive networks of active transportation infrastructure that also will help communities of color address disparate health outcomes and higher rates of pedestrian and bicycle fatalities and serious injuries.

Without question, our nation’s transportation system has been strained by rising demand and the ongoing failure to make adequate investments. We recognize that many transportation sectors need increased funding, but a shortage of overall resources must not be allowed to shortchange active transportation investment in the upcoming reauthorization once more. A survey last spring of Rails-to-Trails Conservancy partners identified over $7 billion in unmet need to fill gaps in active transportation networks. Other organizations have documented additional billions of dollars of trail and active transportation projects needed to connect people to routine destinations and neighboring communities. In addition to all its non-economic benefits, active transportation is the most cost-effective way to move people, spur local economic development and create jobs.
Last summer, the House of Representatives passed HR 2 with increased investment in existing active transportation programs. It also created a critical policy innovation—Active Transportation Connectivity Grants. These federal competitive grants would supplement project-oriented programs administered in the states by providing concentrated investments sufficient to build functional active transportation networks within and between communities. Although two dozen diverse and prominent national organizations as well as nearly 100 state and local organizations called upon Congress to provide this focused investment, these grants were only funded at $250 million for a single year (FY 24) rather than at $500 million for each year of the reauthorization, as outlined in HR 5696. The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee indicated that there was not enough money in the top-line budget figure to fund this critical next step to build out communities' active transportation networks.

For Americans who walk and bike, the need to make the ongoing commitment called for in H.R.5696/S.3391 is the single most important piece of unfinished business as we pivot to a new Congress charged with revisiting HR 2 and updating federal transportation policy to meet this unique moment in history. In addition, the Biden Administration’s plan to invest trillions in infrastructure through stimulus could present another opportunity to address a deep backlog of critical active transportation connections.

We look to your leadership to ensure that federal legislation advances this year with sufficient investment in transportation that is strategically prioritized to meet the need for safe walking and biking routes. These connections will work in tandem with well-supported transit services to meet the mobility needs of all Americans, especially those left behind by car-centric policies. Ample investment that is targeted where it is most needed will help ensure healthier communities, reduced climate emissions, more jobs and a transportation system that works for everyone.

Sincerely,

Kevin Mills
Vice President of Policy
Rails-to-Trails Conservancy

cc:
Senator Ron Wyden
Chair, Senate Finance Committee
Representative Richard Neal
Chair, House Ways and Means Committee

Senator Bernie Sanders
Chair, Senate Budget Committee
Representative John Yarmuth
Chair, House Budget Committee

Senator Tom Carper, Chair
Senate Environment & Public Works Committee
Representative Peter DeFazio, Chair
House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee