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National Association of
City Transportation Officials

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April 2, 2020

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Majority Leader, United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker, United States House of
Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Charles Schumer
Minority Leader, United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader, United States House of
Representatives
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Speaker Pelosi, Leader McConnell, Leader McCarthy, and Leader Schumer:

As the US faces an unprecedented health and economic crisis brought on by the coronavirus pandemic, city and local governments will need strong and thoughtful support from the federal government to continue providing vital public services. The National Association of City Transportation Officials (NACTO) is pleased to see the inclusion of \$25 billion in aid for transit agencies along with additional emergency funding for transportation and city services. However, leaders at all levels of government still have much work ahead to mitigate this pandemic’s public health and economic consequences.

NACTO’s 84 member cities and transit agencies are responsible for a full suite of essential transportation activities and services, from street design and maintenance to running the mass transit systems at the heart of local economies. Since the Covid-19 pandemic first hit the US in early March, city transportation agencies have acted quickly to keep essential workers and goods moving safely and efficiently while relieving crowded streets and public spaces to comply with public health guidance. Even as local governments step up to meet this moment of crisis, sustaining emergency response efforts and fulfilling agency mandates will require significant federal support. In addition to recovering the lost payroll and sales tax revenues cities rely upon to fund public services, it is essential to deploy federal support for public and economic health while fulfilling transportation policy objectives.

To that end, NACTO requests that Congress incorporate the following principles when considering subsequent stimulus funding for transportation:

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- 1. Sustain support for transit agencies.** Public transportation is nothing less than an emergency service during the Covid-19 crisis, with 2.8 million essential workers relying on it to commute daily.¹ The \$25 billion directed to transit in the most recent federal emergency aid package will be critical for ensuring agencies survive this pandemic and essential healthcare and other workers can safely reach their destinations. However, this falls short of the \$38 billion in fares and sales tax revenue that transit operators are projected to lose this year.² Transit agencies also have the added responsibilities of disinfecting their vehicles and facilities while providing protective equipment to keep their own frontline staff safe. Congress must guarantee additional financial support for transit agencies to run frequent service and protect frontline staff for the duration of this crisis, while preparing agencies to resume regular service afterward, as cities work to rebuild their economies.
- 2. Remove administrative barriers to project delivery.** As Congress directs support to city transportation departments through discretionary grant programs, the federal government must work to ensure local partners can reasonably and swiftly access this funding to implement significant projects in a timely manner. NACTO urges Congress to adopt a two-pronged approach to distributing local funding, starting with the creation of an **opt-in direct aid program for cities** to cut the long delays generated by administrative requirements imposed at the state level. This program should be modeled on the existing, successful direct recipient relationship that cities already have with the Federal Transit Administration. Additionally, **NACTO supports transportation stimulus dollars flowing through the existing Surface Transportation Block Grant Program, (STBGP)** including 55 percent being sub-allocated and funding for Transportation Alternatives (subsection h). This funding should allow for all eligibilities of the STBGP, and with a **100 percent federal share**. This action would most benefit smaller, economically disadvantaged communities that are least able to leverage funding matches for critical infrastructure, especially as the Covid-19 pandemic stretches their resources even thinner.

In the interest of conserving local governments' resources while enabling project delivery, Congress should also consider the following actions to remove logistical hurdles that will further delay cities from swiftly implementing projects:

- Allow a blanket waiver to state design guidelines for temporary projects designed to improve transportation during the crisis for people who normally rely on transit for essential trips.
- Grant pedestrian, bicycle, and bus priority projects in the existing right-of-way a NEPA categorical exclusion, including the study of existing roadway capacity
- Do not include 'supplement but not supplant' language found in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Given the unprecedented nature of the current health and economic crisis, this requirement may slow the delivery of much needed stimulus projects.
- Expedite the Buy America waiver process for Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality projects.

Due to the economic slowdown triggered by Covid-19, cities have had to put important infrastructure projects on hold and divert funding and resources towards emergency response. Easing the administrative barriers to project delivery can avoid prolonging delays any further and allow cities to maintain infrastructure and mobility options in the short-term while setting them up to provide expanded services in the future.

- 3. Tie new transportation funding to concrete policy outcomes.** Any new funding for transportation projects emerging from a federal stimulus package must work in service of larger policy goals. NACTO emphasizes the importance of using transportation dollars wisely and in service of safety, sustainability, and equity -

objectives that preceded and remain relevant throughout this crisis. **With 20 percent of the nation's roads and bridges in poor condition, emergency stimulus funding must prioritize maintaining existing infrastructure over expanding or building new highways.** Furthermore, new funding must yield safety and sustainability benefits. Even at this time of crisis, we cannot afford to ignore the tens of thousands of traffic deaths that occur on our streets each year or the transportation sector's place as the largest contributor to national greenhouse gas emissions. Funding a transportation program without correcting for these flaws would further exacerbate systemic issues in how transportation infrastructure is built and financed in the US.

The federal response to this unprecedented global crisis will have long-lasting and far-reaching consequences. The current crisis is changing how Americans live and work, and some of those changes may not be temporary. Fighting the spread of Covid-19 and managing its economic fallout will require an enormous effort from leaders at all levels of government. Allowing cities the flexibility to experiment and test new solutions to evolving transportation needs will support a faster recovery and help cities emerge stronger once the crisis is over. NACTO urges Congress to lead this historic effort in close collaboration with local partners. We invite further discussion on any item in this request and can be reached at corinne@nacto.org.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Corinne', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Corinne Kisner
Executive Director, NACTO

Cc: Chairman John Barrasso, Ranking Member Tom Carper, Chairman Peter DeFazio and Ranking Member Sam Graves

¹ <https://transitcenter.org/2-8-million-u-s-essential-workers-ride-transit-to-their-jobs/>

² <http://t4america.org/2020/03/24/covid-19-will-cost-transit-agencies-26-38-billion-transitcenter-estimates/>