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REMARKS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY BY SECRETARY OF TRANSPORTATION WILLIAM T. COLEMAN, JR., TO THE ANNUAL MEETING, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE HIGHWAY AND TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS, ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI, NOVEMBER 17, 1975

This is the first opportunity I have had to meet with the members of AASHTO in a national assembly, and I want to say at the outset that America is greatly indebted to the men and women at the state level who, for 60 years, have labored to build and sustain the superb highway system we enjoy today. You have my admiration and my gratitude.

May I say, too, that it is my pleasure to have the honor of keynoting your 61st annual meeting. I appreciate your hospitality and that of Governor Bond and the Missouri State Highway Department in hosting this event. And I want to thank President Ritchie and Senator Randolph for their incisive remarks, which conveniently set the stage for what I want to share with you this morning.

I want to address national transportation policy and the steps that I believe must be taken to implement those portions of it that relate to highway and urban transportation. Because I know you have a full agenda this morning, I will make my remarks brief but -- I hope -- unmistakable.

First: Contrary to the views generally attributed to secretaries of transportation, I am neither anti-highway nor anti-auto. But I am not unbiased. As Oscar Wilde once observed, a person can give a truly unbiased opinion only about things that don't interest him; which is the reason, he added, "that unbiased opinions are usually valueless."

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In my statement on national transportation policy that I submitted to the Congress two months ago, I stated my belief that "highway transportation is essential to the preservation of American mobility and our economic well-being." I went on to say that "a high level of performance must be maintained on our nation's major highway systems; for reasons of interstate commerce, personal accommodation and national security."

With respect to the automobile,I noted that "it is and will continue to be the most universally accepted form of transportation in America. It is the most flexible and responsive mode and provides the greatest freedom of mobility. It accounts for large numbers of jobs and has a significant impact on the economy." We must, in my opinion, seek to preserve and maximize the motor vehicle's unique contributions to our culture, lifestyle and economy.

So I have a bias, in favor of highways and automobiles, for the mobility they deliver and the services they provide.

But, secondly, I am deeply concerned that the value of the highway transportation system in our country is being diminished by markedly prejudicial circumstances. The dream of "two cars in every garage" of 30 years ago has come to pass, and the problem is that the cars are not in the garage but on the highways. Our cities cannot contain them; our energy resources cannot forever support them; and our environment cannot tolerate them.

That is why, in my policy statement, I have emphasized that if we are to preserve our highway transportation system we must improve its utilization; and why, in my statements relative to the automobile, I stressed that its "technical performance and its intelligent utilization are matters of urgent and continuing concern."

I think that, on the technical side, the automotive industry will ultimately succeed in producing safer, more utilitarian and fuel-efficient cars that will prove progressively less polluting. It is already gratifying, for example, to see American-built cars in the top ranks of the fuel-economy ratings for the first time in years. I have long believed that the industry could and would respond to market demand for fuel-efficient automobiles.

With regard to the second aspect of my concern for the future of the automobile -- its utilization -- that is a matter primarily up to the states and localities to resolve, although we will continue to work with state and local governments to assist in vehicle control and traffic management. More on that in just a moment.

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Turning to highways, I believe we must recognize that most of today's highways were planned when energy was cheap and abundant, environmental considerations were less prevalent, and the automobile population was about half what it is today. We must also yield to the fact that highways are no longer the only solution -- or even necessarily the best solution -- to a city's transportation needs, and communities should therefore have modal flexibility along with the financial options to support that flexibility.

The highway is an instrument of commerce and conveyance, but it serves society and its social values must be respected. That was recognized way back in 1632 when the Virginia Legislature ordained that "highways shall be laid out in such convenient places as the parishioners of every parish shall agree."

Having adjudicated the long-simmering I-66 highway dispute in Northern Virginia a few months ago, I can attest to the fact that "agreement by the parishioners" is not as easy to come by as it once was. When the I-66 issues had been sorted, sifted and studied, my bottom-line conclusion was that, as the matter was submitted to me, it was simply the wrong time and the wrong place for an otherwise excellent project.

We have traveled a long way and authorized many billions of dollars for highway projects since Federal involvement in the highway program began in 1919 with a half-million dollar expenditure for 17 miles of road construction. We have come a long way since the Interstate program was launched 19 years ago.

Here in Missouri alone Interstate highway construction has consumed $1.23 billion, of which $1.1 billion has come from Federal sources. More than one thousand miles of Interstate are open to traffic in this state, with 95 percent of your planned Interstate system now complete or under construction.

But with these achievements behind us, and proportionately similar accomplishments laid down in asphalt and concrete in each of the other 49 states, what can we do now to best improve the utilization of our highway transportation system?

Let me suggest the following:

First: completion of the Interstate system must be a top Federal priority, especially where connective intercity links are concerned.

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Second: statutory provision should be made for the rehabilitation and modernization of the Interstate system as such needs occur. We must not let our highways go the way of our railroads, declining and decaying for lack of maintenance.

Third: the merits of trust fund financing should be re-examined in light of the diversity of future requirements. I am in favor of adequate funding authorizations for highway programs, but such funding -- I believe -- should be consistent with other national transportation needs and priorities, and not determined on the basis of gasoline tax revenues.

I should point out in this connection that the bill we have before the Congress -- the Federal Highway Act of 1975 -- would authorize $3.25 billion a year for the Interstate system, $1.05 billion for rural highways, $800 million for urban highways, and $400 million for safety. In addition, through proposed changes in the Federal gasoline tax allocation formula, more than $1 billion a year would be turned back to the states.

As you know, the level of funding and the future of the Highway Trust Fund are currently the subjects of some debate in Congress. I am hopeful that, in view of the energy situation and the mounting problems in our cities, Congress will act favorably in support of my fourth cornerstone for highway transportation improvements, which is increased flexibility in planning and implementing local transportation programs.

At his swearing-in, my colleague in the Cabinet, Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare Dr. David Mathews, spoke of the difficulty in dealing with the "demanding issues of our day shaped by the inevitable conflicts in our good intentions."

I am concerned that we shall not resolve the conflicts in our good intentions with respect to better urban transportation until we effectively merge the highway and mass transit planning and funding processes for metropolitan areas. The National Mass Transportation Assistance Act of 1974, and the funding substitution provisions of the 1973 Federal-Aid Highway Act, have moved us toward the reality of such a merger.

We took another step closer late in September with the issuance of regulations governing the planning and programming of urban transportation improvements. These regulations are the joint product of our Federal Highway and Urban Mass Transportation Administrations, and represent one of the forward strides I have longed to see in the subordination of modal interests to the larger and more important public interest.

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The thrust of these regulations is to bring the highway and transit planning processes formally, and finally, under one umbrella, and to increase the responsibility for decision-making at the metropolitan level.

Let me be quick to say that there was no intention on our part to write the states out of regional or local planning. You will recall that during Congressional deliberations of the 1973 Highway Act, there were versions of the bill which, on the one hand, would have put urban highway responsibilities solely in the trust of the cities; and versions which, on the ohter hand, would have given the whole package to the states. The range of transit options was just as broad.

What we have tried to do is take the 1973 Highway Act, and the 1974 Mass Transportation Amendments, and write a set of regulations consistent with the Congressional intent, as reflected in the final compromise positions.

I would urge you as state leaders in highway and transportation planning to work with regional and local planning authorities to develop the harmonious multi-modal transportation system every major urban community must have.

In addition to the overall transportation plan, our regulations specify the importance of improved traffic management. Unless automobiles, public transportation, taxis and pedestrians are managed together, maximum efficiency for the urban transportation system as a whole will not succeed.

This will almost certainly entail, as I menticned earlier, the necessity for overt action to constrain automobile traffic. As you know, we undertook last July a year-long study to determine the feasibility of "auto-restricted zones" in U.S. cities, and we plan to fund several demonstration projects if the study recommends such projects. We will not, however, dictate traffic management techniques to the states or cities; each locality should and will be free to adopt those practices that best serve its needs.

I would not leave you, however, with the impression that the last urban highway in America has been built. New urban highways are appropriate when they are part of a coordinated metropolitan transportation plan and will help to alleviate congestion or energy-waste by diverting through traffic around city centers. New urban highways may be the best solution to a particular transportation need when they close a loop, complete a traffic pattern, or incorporate express lanes for high-occupancy vehicles.

But new urban highways, I caution, are inappropriate where they induce greater automobile commuter traffic, contribute to suburban sprawl, unnecessarily divert passengers from public transit, or violate environmental standards. Under these conditions, the highway is as unwelcome on the urban scene as it is essential to the rural resident or traveler.

Let me say in conclusion, that it is now clear that the transportation policies developed and implemented when we had endless reaches of land to build on, and seemingly unlimited energy to burn, are no longer acceptable.

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We have invested heavily and, for the most part, wisely in our highway system. We must act now to protect and enhance that investment, by bringing policies into closer conformity with other national goals and values.

The merging of transit and highway interests in urban transportation planning is essential not only for improved productivity but for greater energy efficiencies. Two years after the oil embargo closed some service stations and produced long lines at others, we find that we are (1) more dependent on OPEC countries for oil than we were before the embargo; (2) paying $25 billion a year for oil imports compared to an average of $3 billion a year up to 1973; and (3) still awaiting affirmative Congressional action on President Ford's energy program or some meaningful plan of equal merit.

On the plus side, we have achieved some measure of conservation success. Petroleum consumption is down about 2 million barrels a day from pre-embargo levels. The 55 mph speed limit is helping.

But conservation efforts alone will not suffice. Our transportation policies must reflect the consciousness that we no longer have energy to burn - that fuel efficiency must enter into our transportation plans and programs along with environmental, economic and social considerations. There's simply no way of doing highway business the "old way" any more. But there is still highway business to be done. And I am confident that the highways built or improved according to today's higher standards and ideals will be the best highways we have yet produced.

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