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An Open Letter to USDOT Secretary Pete Buttigieg

Article By Wendell R. Stemley, CMAA

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Hopefully President Biden's \$2.2 Trillion Infrastructure Bill will allow Transportation Secretary Buttigieg to address generations of infrastructure discrimination.

As America continues to struggle, "The Administration's Priorities for Transportation Infrastructure" hearing, was held on March 25 by the House Committee on Transportation & Infrastructure. The star witness for the hearing was newly-confirmed Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg. In the wake of Covid-19, America needs to take advantage of every economic opportunity possible. Fortunately, the construction sector has the potential to play a key role in our nation's financial recovery.

The administration must understand that without the will to enforce Disadvantaged Business Enterprise (DBE) compliance, the federal government will be compounding the problem by giving funding to the same states and governors which did not comply with federal participation goals in the past. In some cases, states who have chosen to focus on limiting minority voting rights will think nothing of continued non-compliance for DBE participation. Nearly 50% of all states did not make the DBE participation goals established for minority- and women-owned businesses required by federally funded or federally-assisted projects.

State	2019 Participation Goal	% State Missed the Goal
Connecticut	12.10%	-0.24%
Georgia	16.00%	-3.76%
Hawaii	29.05%	-21.95%
Idaho	8.30%	-1.62%
Illinois	18.70%	-3.65%
Iowa	5.94%	-0.06%
Kentucky	11.95%	-2.70%
Louisiana	13.09%	-3.43%
Maryland	26.04%	-7.58%
Michigan	9.20%	-2.01%

State	2019 Participation Goal	% State Missed the Goal
Minnesota	12.23%	-1.77%
Missouri	16.05%	-5.31%
Montana	6.14%	-0.56%
North Carolina	14.00%	-1.72%
North Dakota	4.91%	-0.30%
Ohio	15.60%	-4.33%
Oklahoma	9.20%	-1.92%
Texas	12.60%	-2.09%
Washington	19.00%	-6.53%
Wisconsin	12.33%	-1.77%

Source: USDOT

As Congress continues to consider ways to jumpstart our economy, to include investment in infrastructure, lawmakers need to ensure that these potential solutions have the right protections for economically disadvantaged rural and urban communities which are underserved and underfunded. Too often, federal funds come in to improve these communities only to end up being diverted at the state, county, and city level, thus leaving these areas in the same condition in which they were found.

“Whether it’s flooding from severe weather events like hurricanes or it’s something like this severe cold, the history of our response to disasters is that our communities are hit first, harder and have to suffer the longest,” said Robert Bullard, a professor at Texas Southern University and an expert on wealth and racial disparities related to the environment, in a recent New York Times interview with James Dobbins and Hiroko Tabuchi.

Cities like Flint, Michigan, the Gulf Coast region from Texas, and the Mississippi Wetland Rivers of Louisiana suffer from corrosion, leaks, and breaks in old pipes which degrade water delivery and sewage treatment systems critical to public health and the environment. Every day, 850 water main breaks occur in North America at a total annual repair cost of over \$3 billion. This doesn’t include the high cost of emergency equipment, depleted water supplies, traffic disruptions, and lost work time. Experts note that corrosion is the leading cause of this water main break epidemic. The American Society of Civil Engineers has consistently given poor marks to the nation’s public drinking and wastewater systems saying hundreds of billions of dollars must be spent over the next two decades for upgrades and replacement.

The Gulf Coast region from Texas, the Mississippi Wetland Rivers of Louisiana from north Baton Rouge to New Orleans have been plagued with so many Infrastructure and industrial accidents that it has been nicknamed Cancer Alley. The minority community I grew up in is called Standard Heights neighborhood of Baton Rouge, where we lived with house mysterious flakes falling from the sky and in the water. Standard Heights is now

mostly twenty square miles of abandoned structures tucked into a corner of the Exxon Mobile plant in North Baton Rouge a State dependent on the oil industry. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) was called in to test the air, the water, the soil, the urine, the blood and everything else for specific chemicals, but results weren't provided or clearly reported to the community. No settlement was ever reached and hundreds of houses were lost , abandoned or otherwise sold for offers of less than \$19,000 dollars to relocate. There is nothing left of that neighborhood.

Retired U.S. Army Lt. General Russell Honoré known for his excellent work on rebuilding New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina spoke from the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN) Office, saying, "So I ask people, if the industry is doing so well for us, do we have the best roads? The best schools? Hospitals? The answer to all of them is we're either last or second to last to Mississippi, and Mississippi hardly has any oil and gas. We got the largest concentration of pipeline in the U.S., so where's the money going?" (Story by David Hanson)

Infrastructure is not just about roads. While funding this bill will help tremendously with infrastructure upgrades, without adequate protections for urban and rural communities, funding the Infrastructure bill alone will not be enough to resolve local concerns and infrastructure discrimination. Without adequate protections, one part of a city will enjoy the benefits of new infrastructure while other communities continue to suffer from a lack of access to broadband services, a stable electrical grid, clean drinking water and reliable sewer systems.

Infrastructure discrimination impacts every aspect of our lives, from medical care and access to quality food. Citizens must remain involved with local leaders, such governors, mayors, city council members, and congressional representatives, to ensure their communities' and individual needs are included in government appropriations to protect America's infrastructure as a human rights issue which includes jobs and business opportunities for all.

A CALL TO ACTION

Infrastructure discrimination impacts every aspect of our lives, from access to quality food and medical care to banking services and legitimate check cashing services. Citizens must remain involved with local leaders, governors, mayors, city council members, and congressional representatives for fair share of the Infrastructure money.