

Remarks of Terence M. O'Sullivan
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Thank you, Richard Ravitch for that kind introduction. It is an honor to be here today with so many distinguished guests.

I want to thank Congressman Earl Blumenauer for his leadership, epitomized by the introduction of the bill to establish the U.S. Commission on Rebuilding America for the 21st Century ... and Congressman Jim Oberstar and Congresswoman Nancy Pelosi, who could not be here today ... and to Governor Rendell. And thank you Robert Yaro for your leadership as President of the Regional Plan Association ... thank you to every local planning commission across the country, and to all the leaders in this movement to build America.

We are all arriving at this conference from different parts of our country, and from different perspectives – from business, labor and non-profit organizations, from regions where “green” governs politics to regions yearning for jobs at any cost. But we are here as Americans first.

That will be the beauty of this symposium, because alliances and common ground is what it has always taken and always will take to solve the biggest challenges America faces.

If we look at where our nation is today when it comes to infrastructure – the basics of America – and if we truly set out to renew and rebuild America so America works, we're sure going to need more of this kind of discussion and cooperation to translate our vision into reality.

We're going to need to build a political movement that isn't Republican or Democrat, right wing or left wing, not big city or small town, not East Coast or West Coast, but a movement that is practical enough, big enough and smart enough to get the job done.

At LIUNA, we're up for the challenge.

The Laborers' Union has a long tradition of reaching out to both sides of the aisle in Congress to build the coalitions needed to get important legislation passed and of never hesitating to meet with employers to build the goodwill to ensure our mutual success.

We are an organization of a half-million workers in 400 Local Unions across the United States who go to work every day to build America.

LIUNA members – and the millions of construction workers like them – build our highways, our mass transit systems, our bridges and dams, our airport runways and our schools. We maintain sewer systems, dig tunnels,

retrofit skyscrapers to emit fewer greenhouse gases, build pipelines that carry natural gas and oil and erect windmill farms.

We are builders. But we don't only build – like all working people, we rely on the basic infrastructure of America every day.

So when we say build America so America works, it has multiple meanings for us.

Building America is an urgent priority for us as Americans and building America is what we do.

Building America is about ensuring the quality of daily life. It is about saving lives. It is about fighting for our country and it's about living up to the American Dream.

The image of the I-35 Bridge collapsing in Minneapolis last summer is seared in America's memory and in the memory of our organization.

LIUNA members were on that bridge, some simply crossing the Mississippi River as millions do every day and others were working on a repaving crew. I can tell you that every one of those members would rather have been fixing that bridge instead of just patching it.

There were numerous warnings about the I-35 bridge dating back to 1990s, but even after its deadly collapse there remain today more than 150,000 bridges across this country that are still in need of repair.

It's time that we helped America understand how urgent a priority it is that we repair, rebuild and renew the basics in our country rather than using band-aid fixes.

Instead of debating a so-called gas tax holiday that would gut investment in our country's highways and bridges as we approach the one-year anniversary of that deadly tragedy, we should be signing into law a new vision to build America.

Overall, the American Society of Civil Engineers believes we have a \$1.6 trillion problem when it comes to bridges, highways, schools, dams, waterways, drinking water, and other basic infrastructure.

Yet our country's answer to this problem so far is to nickel and dime it instead of investing the dollars needed to truly address this crisis. The Highway Trust Fund is facing a shortfall that could lead to a 30-percent reduction in highway funds for states in 2009.

The gap between what's needed and what's provided for highways is \$50 billion a year. And that's just the immediate cost – every delay in taking care of our highways raises the eventual cost of fixing them. The longer we wait, the more it will cost.

The capacity of America's rail system is failing to keep up with our needs for both freight and commuter transit. For America to continue competing in a global economy, we must make sure that goods can be quickly and efficiently transported, but that is becoming increasingly difficult given the lack of investment to improve our freight rail system.

Inadequate airport capacity is contributing to record flight cancellations and delays. The FAA estimates that over one billion people will travel on commercial airlines each year for the next ten years. To get them where they are going on time and safely, our country will have to better support air traffic.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, of the 257 locks on the more than 12,000 miles of inland waterways operated by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, nearly 50 percent are functionally obsolete. By 2020, that number will increase to 80 percent as a result of poor maintenance. The U.S. Army corps of

Engineers has reported that approximately 150 U.S. levees pose an unacceptable failure risk. And the number of troubled dams has risen by more than 33 percent over the last ten years.

Our symbols of greatness define us – the Golden Gate Bridge, the Hoover Dam, the Statue of Liberty. But today the schools where we send our children to learn are “D” rated, too often overcrowded or run-down.

In 2003, the Modular Building Institute estimated that more than 220,000 portable classrooms were in use by public school systems in the United States.

Today we face no longer being able to compete around the world because our highways are too crowded to efficiently move goods or people. Our railways are outdated... our waterways are insufficient... our basic public facilities such as schools are crying out for attention ... and our reliance only on traditional energy is sapping our economy.

Do we really want to be a country that wastes more than 5 billion gallons of gas every year because cars are idling in traffic in virtually every major population center every day?

We need a bigger vision. We must tell America the truth – there is a solution, but it’s not a nickel and dime solution for a \$1.6 trillion problem.

Too often our politics makes our vision too small.

Our country needs a new American Marshall plan to tackle this crisis, a new way to think about and invest in the basics of America. That is how we became the only country to land on the moon, to lay claim to the tallest buildings, and win the Cold War and became the beacon of hope and promise around the globe.

We can build America so America works again.

Despite what Washington sometimes thinks money does not grow on trees. That means that we must choose to build America, to make it a priority and redirect the resources to get the job done.

In 1964, the federal government spent about ½ of one percent of the GDP on non-defense investment for states and localities. Today it is less than one-half of one-tenth of one percent.

We have choices to make. We can debate whether our tax system is fair, and we can debate our foreign policy, but it’s not debatable that the recent tax breaks for the wealthiest – amounting to \$1.3 trillion – or the current war in Iraq – projected to exceed \$2 trillion – would meet the basic needs of America.

We will have to choose to renew and rebuild America. Unions, workers, corporations, the Chamber of Commerce and elected officials willing to lead must unite together behind a new vision.

For labor unions this is a uniquely working family issue. Building America is what our members, and millions like them do. It is what they are proud to do – let’s let them do it.

Building America is a top priority in daily life, and in reviving jobs and our economy. And it is working people who will pay and suffer the most if we fail to act.

But it is also an issue that encourages common ground and unity. It was natural that the vast majority of the business community, progressives and unions have rejected the politicized call for a “gas tax holiday.”

We all saw through it for what it is – robbing Peter to pay Paul, taking 18 cents out of one pocket and putting it in the other, threatening programs working people rely on every day without solving a single problem. The gas tax holiday is not the answer.

The real gas tax in America is the \$400 a year we all spend on wasted gas because we’re stuck in traffic.

Still, we can't be so tied to the past that we are unable to realize that the future will require a different approach. As we move forward to specific legislation we have to be willing to question our current model for investment.

When it comes to highways and transit, does it make sense for America to solely rely on the gas tax, a user fee, to maintain the basics of its transportation system?

Transportation in America today is a basic necessity – do we finance our police departments through a user fee? Our school teachers?

America is eager for a bigger solution and vision... and LIUNA is tired of patching bridges that we could proudly fix or build.

This week our union has launched its biggest effort ever to build a movement to build America. We think how people view this and how we frame it is crucial to our success. Our initiative will be a long-term effort to drive a new vision.

We started this week with advertising outreach targeting opinion leaders and elected leaders in Washington, D.C., including a half-dozen publications, online and outdoor ads. We'll soon have a TV spot, airing at first on the CNN Airport Network.

We'll move our efforts outward from D.C. to Denver and to communities around the country with both earned and paid media.

We will get our message out with bus wraps with mobile billboards at rush hour and any other way we can.

We have launched a new website – LiunaBuildsAmerica.org – and we will strive to make it the most important source of information about building America, and about the men and women who do it.

All of our efforts will center on the Petition to Build America. We will gather the signatures of 1 million Americans who will tell Congress and our next president to Build America so America Works.

We believe that if we ask Americans what kind of country we should be – one falling into decline or the country with the best transit, the best waterways, the best energy infrastructure in the world, we believe Americans will choose to be the best. We believe that if we ask Americans what kind of country we should be – a nation settling for falling behind or a country moving forward, they will choose to move forward ...but only if we redirect our nation's resources to our priorities.

We want you beside us and we will stand beside you. Together we're going to fight for our country. Together we're going to fight to build America, so America does work.

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