



TESTIMONY OF MAYOR BYRON W. BROWN
CITY OF BUFFALO, NEW YORK
SUBCOMMITTEE ON TRADE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

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*Advancing U.S. Economic Competitiveness, Equity,
Sustainability Through Infrastructure Investment*

Chairman Blumenauer, Ranking Member Buchanan, members of this subcommittee, my name is Byron Brown and I've been fortunate enough to serve as the Mayor of the City of Buffalo since 2006. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today before the Ways & Means Subcommittee on Trade on how the lack of infrastructure funding has hurt the competitiveness of cities.

I'd like to open by expressing my support for President Biden's American Jobs Plan because it restores the traditional partnership between the Federal government and local municipalities which previously existed when it came to infrastructure funding. Historically, cities like Buffalo had a partner in the Federal government when it came to building critical infrastructure. That partnership was vital to helping Buffalo, and other communities around the United States, develop their economies, provide working class families the opportunity to have a good home in a stable neighborhood, and sustain a healthy pace of development. However, over the last several decades, the nature of that partnership has changed as the Federal government's investment grew smaller, putting the burden on local governments to make up the difference. That shift to a greater local cost share had an unintended, but especially harmful, consequence because it came at a time when local governments were losing their ability to raise revenues sufficient to cover the high cost of infrastructure investment.

Beginning in the early 1960s, Buffalo's tax base, like that of other medium and small-sized Northeastern manufacturing cities, changed rapidly. Suburban development drew a greater number of middle-class homeowners away. This began to deprive Buffalo of the solid economic base it had relied on to fund services, maintain property values or taxes, and attract employers.

The residents who remained were often lower-income African Americans and other minorities who faced various types of housing and employment discrimination, or others who were still committed to enjoying the benefits of city living, but did not have incomes sufficiently large enough to cover the gaps created by suburban migration. These migration patterns, along with a significant drop over time in Federal infrastructure support, in many ways helped lay the foundation for the current environmental justice challenges facing our urban areas today.

As a result, our infrastructure deteriorated, with the work being done on it relegated mostly to maintenance and repairs. This has proven to be an unsustainable approach. The costs of this work are being borne by a segment of constituents who cannot afford to pay for it while, at the same time, the funding required for even this bare minimum approach is still growing.

The key to ending this cycle and restoring a sense of equity to our infrastructure funding is having a re-engaged Federal partner that is willing to help fund the infrastructure work that will allow cities to modernize, employ innovative technologies that reduce maintenance costs, build systems that will be more resilient against the effects of global climate change, and then pass those savings on to residents in an equitable or restorative way.

Situated on the U.S. - Canadian border, about 62 miles from Toronto, Buffalo's economy is heavily dependent on foreign trade. Canada is New York State's number one export market; with over \$19 billion in goods and services being exported to Canada annually. Trade between New York and Canada also supports 680,000 jobs. When Ontario can resume normal activities after this latest surge in the number of COVID-19 cases passes, it is expected to return to its economic growth trend and likely even experience a period of rapid recovery just as we are now experiencing in the United States. This all points toward a future where trade between our two nations will be as vibrant and as critical to our mutual success as ever.

However, to take full advantage of this moment we must not only consider the volume of trade our infrastructure systems should be prepared to handle, but also the type of trade and the manner with which it is conducted. New technologies, new services, and new modes of transportation are emerging at a rapid pace. We must have an infrastructure that will be able to meet the demands of these changes if Buffalo is able to take full advantage of these trading opportunities.

This means that our transportation infrastructure must be capable of supporting the autonomous electric vehicles that will soon become an important component of the transportation industry. These 'low or no carbon' vehicles will rely on the presence of sensors, communications devices, and a charging infrastructure which we ought to lay the foundation for now and be ready to quickly implement when the technology for scaled deployment is available. Smart transportation and mobility as the key to reduce congestion throughout the City. Trade will also take on an increasingly digital aspect, with information being shared between universities, financial institutions, and biomedical researchers being just as important as the goods which move across our border. To do this, our information infrastructure must have greater capacity, be more secure, and provide greater accessibility to every resident of Buffalo. That last component is critical to ending some of the economic, race and wealth disparities that have grown larger and more rapidly in cities across this nation. The ability to move goods and people by rail must also be improved if my city is to remain competitive. The United States and Canada's renewed commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions can only be accomplished through a more robust rail network which can quickly and efficiently transport people and products across our border. This will mean dedicated lines for high-speed rail between metro areas like Buffalo and Toronto as well as greater commercial rail capacity so our reliance on other carbon producing modes of transit shrinks. Now more than ever, the Federal government needs to ensure Buffalo and other cities have the resources they need to create the infrastructure that allows us to compete globally.

Infrastructure is an important contributor to our economic development, retaining and attracting Buffalo's workforce, green infrastructure planning, protecting our public health, and the revitalization of our neighborhoods. Since 2014, Buffalo has invested over \$110 million to address stormwater concerns that cause overflows and degrade our waterways. Green Streets have become a leading solution to address climate, water quality, and neighborhood economic problems. We are not asking for just an infusion of funding, but instead for a recommitment to the idea that people who live in cities like Buffalo will have a future where they can raise a family, find a good job, and live a healthier life.

The economic crisis fostered by the COVID pandemic offers a unique opportunity for Buffalo to reimagine and create a more equitable City. Infrastructure can be a powerful connector, unfortunately it has often been used to divide America. That is why I am encouraged that President Biden's American Jobs Plan seeks to intentionally 'Build Back Better', the places, like Buffalo, that we all call home. The proposed \$620 billion investment in our nation's transportation infrastructure including roads, bridges, and electrification as well as the \$45 billion investment to rid America of lead service lines, and \$66 billion commitment to innovative clean water solutions will have a huge impact in cities like Buffalo.

With a poverty rate exceeding 30%, many of our residents in Buffalo find it difficult to afford their water bills. Our low-income customers are often faced with the realities of household financial burdens while balancing rent, heat, food and water costs. Buffalo developed and released its Residential Affordable Water Program in 2019 to support our customers in need through operational funds. The \$500 million, as proposed in President Biden's American Jobs Plan, is a one-time programmatic appropriation, to provide funding for Low-Income Water Assistance Program. With a national estimate of need at \$8.7 billion annually, significant additional funding for the Low-Income Water Assistance Program is needed to help those households that are unable to pay.

Supporting low-income water customers can not solely be left to our City. There is annual budgeted federal support for low income citizens as it relates to food, shelter and energy – it is apparent that this support is necessary for water, that we all know is essential for life.

A permanent national low-income water assistance program is necessary if Cities, like Buffalo, are to ensure sufficient revenue to meet infrastructure and mandate requirements, while lessening the burden on the most vulnerable households. A permanent solution needs to be properly funded to ensure that the growing number of households that are unable to pay are supported.

Buffalo also continues to protect our most vulnerable from the effects of lead poisoning by optimizing water treatment and eliminating lead service lines. Buffalo has created regulations to ensure that lead service lines are replaced and no longer repaired. Since 2016, Buffalo established an action limit of 5ppb, which still leads the nation, but we understand that the presence of lead service lines endangers our young children and seniors alike.

With a commitment under President Biden's plan to remove 100% of lead service lines, dedicated and flexible investments need to be supported. As the lead service lines here in Buffalo remain the responsibility of the property owner, it is imperative that with the mandated public health responsibility, our municipality is provided the means and authority to fully replace these lead service lines to provide safe drinking water for our residents.

Due to the age of our housing stock and our City, we estimate the costs to replace 100% of lead service lines to be \$350 - \$500 million. Substantial funding and appropriate authority is necessary to eliminate the threat that lead service lines present to our most vulnerable residents.

It is also critically important that any infrastructure funding balance the need for a recommitment to large, macro-scale projects which require multi-state cooperation with the local flexibility necessary to use any Federal funds in the manner that will result in the

greatest good for the greatest number of residents who have experienced the most harm from the federal government's previous infrastructure policies. In Buffalo, we are committed to balancing the calls for racial equity, environmental justice, climate change, and economic development in every policy and program we develop and undertake. That same commitment applies to improvements we are making to our local infrastructure.

President Biden's American Jobs Plan is an investment in America that will create millions of good jobs, rebuild our country's infrastructure, and position cities like Buffalo to not only complete but to succeed economically.

As I mentioned earlier, after decades of disinvestment in our infrastructure we are falling behind our competitors on research and development, broadband technology, transportation, manufacturing, and training. It has never been more important for us to invest in strengthening our infrastructure and competitiveness, and in creating the good-paying, union jobs of the future. For these reasons I strongly urge you to pass The American Jobs act without delay.

This is the type of infrastructure funding plan that America, and cities like Buffalo, desperately needs and which is contemplated in President Biden's American Jobs Plan. Not only is our global competitiveness at stake but our ability to trade with our closest neighbors effectively and efficiently is as well. I am asking the Congress to take a broad and forward-looking view of our infrastructure needs and pass a bill that addresses both the gaps we are immediately confronting as well as the systems we can anticipate being vital to our ongoing success. That is why I hope the members of the Subcommittee will consider supporting this legislation and its capacity to radically improve the lives of Americans now and into the future.

I would like to thank the members of the Subcommittee for their time and the opportunity to present my thoughts on the present need for increased Federal investment in infrastructure. I also want to thank my friend and colleague, Congressman Brian Higgins for his commitment to Buffalo and for his leadership in this area. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.