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Oberstar proposal moves recovery debate in the right direction

Washington – Congressman James Oberstar (D-MN), chair of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, has performed a great service to the writers of the proposed economic recovery bill with his Rebuild America proposal.

Chairman Oberstar's bill sets a high priority on creating and retaining jobs in infrastructure maintenance and repair, construction and transit service. The \$85 billion proposal provides critical guidance on how investments should be prioritized, starting first with repairing and maintaining what we have. It also includes accountability provisions that would help to ensure these funds are spent wisely.

Oberstar's measure would provide \$30 billion for roads and bridges, with an emphasis on repair and maintenance. It would allocate a substantial \$12 billion to public transportation and \$5 billion to intercity rail. The remainder of the money would go to other infrastructure, including aviation, water, and energy retrofits of federal buildings.

The Oberstar bill is especially appealing because it would speed funds to near-term repair projects while also supporting longer-term projects that could get going within a year.

This is a significant factor for advancing rail and rapid bus projects, many of which are languishing because of insignificant federal funds and a longer review process.

Transportation for America has identified more than \$4 billion worth of new transit investment that could advance in 120 days, and almost \$20 billion in the next year, if new funds could break the logjam in the federal program for transit construction, known as New Starts. These projects support jobs in the planning, manufacturing, design and construction industries and could have long-lasting transformative impacts and economic development benefits for communities that go well beyond mere construction.

In addition to funding for New Starts, Congressman Oberstar's proposal includes \$7.5 billion for transit capital grants for vehicle purchase and facility improvements, based on the existing urban and rural formula grant system. The bill would require half of these funds to be obligated in 90 days and the other half for projects beginning within the year. Transportation For America strongly supports the proposal's inclusion of \$2 billion for transit energy assistance grants.

Congressman Oberstar's proposal would prioritize funds to be spent quickly on much-needed repairs to our transportation system and help preserve existing construction and transit operating jobs. Transportation for America commends Congressman Oberstar for his efforts to make transportation an important part of a recovery package to create jobs in the short term. We agree that job creation need not be at odds with strong accountability requirements and a more balanced portfolio of modal investments in capital and operating grants.

An overview of Congressman Oberstar's Rebuild America bill is posted on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's website, <http://transportation.house.gov>.

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About The Transportation for America Campaign

Transportation for America is a broad coalition of housing, environmental, public health, urban planning, transportation and other organizations focused on creating a 21st Century national transportation program. T4's goal is to build a modernized infrastructure and healthy communities where people can live, work and play by aligning national, state, and local transportation policies with an array of issues like economic opportunity, climate change, energy security, health, housing and community development. www.t4america.org