

FLOOR STATEMENT
ON FY 2020 THUD APPROPRIATIONS ACT
SENATOR SUSAN COLLINS
October 23, 2019

I am pleased the Senate is beginning debate on the fiscal year 2020 Appropriations bill for the Departments of Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies. This bill has been included in the appropriations package that has just now been brought before this chamber.

Let me begin my remarks by thanking Chairman Shelby and Vice Chairman Leahy for their bipartisan leadership in advancing these appropriations bills to the Senate floor. Given that we reached a two-year bi-cameral, bi-partisan budget agreement in August and the new fiscal year began on October 1, it is imperative for the Senate to move these bills quickly and to go to conference with the House in order to avoid further continuing resolutions, or even worse, a government shutdown.

I also want to acknowledge the hard work and strong commitment of my friend and colleague, Senator Jack Reed, the Ranking Member of the T-HUD Subcommittee. We have worked so closely together in drafting this bill, which includes more than 950 requests from 75 Senators. Let me repeat that—we received 950 requests from three-quarters of our colleagues for ideas for this bill, for funding levels and in support of certain programs. We evaluated all of them very carefully and accommodated as many as we could. The T-HUD bill passed the full Appropriations Committee by a unanimous vote of 31-0. It reflects a truly bipartisan product.

The allocation for the fiscal year 2020 Transportation and Housing Appropriations bill is \$74.3 billion, which is \$3.2 billion above the current funding levels. This additional funding is necessary because of rising rental costs across the country and a reduction in the receipts from the Federal Housing Administration that are used to offset some of the spending in this bill.

In spite of these considerable funding challenges, our bill not only fully funds the renewal of housing assistance for low-income seniors and other vulnerable populations, but it also continues to provide robust investments in our infrastructure. For example, the bill provides \$1 billion for the highly-effective and popular BUILD grant program. The BUILD grant program helps fund critical infrastructure projects that promote economic development and the creation of jobs. I am proud to say that Maine has won a BUILD grant every year of the program, including a \$25 million grant to replace the Sarah Mildred Long Bridge that is critical to the operations of the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard in Kittery, Maine.

Particularly important to states like Maine, the bill also provides much-needed highway resources. While only 19 percent of the U.S. population lives in rural areas, 46 percent of traffic fatalities occur in rural America. That is because the roads and the bridges in rural parts of our country are frequently in much poorer condition than urban areas. Building on the success of the rural bridge rehabilitation program over the last two years, our bill provides \$1.25 billion in dedicated funding for bridges that are deteriorating and nearing the end or have reached the end of their useful life.

This bill fully funds the INFRA grant program, which provides resources for large infrastructure projects through a competitive grant process. In FY 2019, I was pleased to advocate for the MaineDOT's successful application to replace the Madawaska International Bridge in Northern Maine. This project will help to replace a critical connector between Madawaska and New Brunswick on the Canadian side of the border. This is so important to the economy of Northern Maine and supports more than 5,800 direct and indirect jobs. Right now, that bridge has been posted, and that means that heavy trucks are unable to cross in the most effective and shortest route between Edmundston, New Brunswick, and Madawaska, Maine.

These critical programs support not only much-needed infrastructure projects, but also jobs and economic growth in each and every one of our home states. The American Society of Civil Engineers conducts a comprehensive assessment of our nation's infrastructure every four years. Its most recent report card from 2017 shows that America's infrastructure remains in poor condition with a grade of "D+". That should be a call to action to all of us. It is simply unacceptable. It creates not only safety problems, but impedes economic development.

One in 11 of our nation's bridges is rated as structurally deficient, and the average age of our country's more than 600,000 bridges is 43 years old. Our national highway system contains infrastructure that is now well past its useful life.

Some bridges are more than 100 years old, and many have had to be posted and are unable to accommodate today's traffic volumes. Without the critical funding in the T-HUD bill dedicated to bridges, as well as the BUILD grant program, we simply will not be able to make progress to improve our nation's infrastructure.

For aviation, the bill provides \$17.7 billion in resources for the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), which allows us to fully fund air traffic control personnel, including more than 14,000 air traffic controllers and more than 25,000 engineers, maintenance technicians, safety inspectors, and operational support staff. Given the significant challenges that the F.A.A. faces in aviation safety, particularly as has become evident with the certification of the Boeing 737-MAX aircraft, the bill increases funding for aviation safety and aircraft certification activities and requires the F.A.A. to respond to each and every one of the recommendations made by the Inspector General and National Transportation Safety Board once their audits and reviews are completed. In addition, it requires the F.A.A. to move forward with a rulemaking on safety management systems for aircraft manufacturers and to assess its own internal workforce.

The bill also provides \$1.2 billion for FAA's Next Generation Air Transportation Systems programs, also known as "NextGen," to improve the efficiency and safety of the national air space. This funding is critical for reducing delays and addressing congestion at some of the nation's busiest airports.

Of particular importance to rural communities, the bill fully funds the Contract Towers program and the Essential Air Service program. In addition, the bill provides \$450 million in Airport Improvement Program, or A.I.P., funding. This supplemental A.I.P. funding has been

extremely helpful for small airports in Maine that would otherwise not be able to complete runway extension projects that are vital for air ambulances.

Turning to maritime programs, the bill provides full funding for our nation's State Maritime Academies as well as the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, all of which play a critical role in training the next generation of U.S. mariners. The bill provides \$300 million for the third special purpose vessel to be used as a training school ship for the state maritime academies. In accordance with the guidance provided three years ago by MARAD, new training ships will replace existing aging training ships in the order in which those ships are expected to reach the end of their useful life. Over the past two years, we have funded replacement ships for the New York State Maritime Academy and the Massachusetts Maritime Academy. Funding in this bill will replace the aging vessel at the Maine Maritime Academy, which was next on the list. These new ships provide training capacity for all six State Maritime Academies and ensure that cadets receive the training hours they need to graduate and join the workforce in the merchant marine, Navy, and Coast Guard.

In the area of housing, our priority is to ensure that our nation's most vulnerable do not lose their housing assistance and become homeless. Therefore, the bill provides necessary funding increases to cover the higher costs of rental assistance for the most vulnerable among us, including disabled citizens and our low-income seniors.

Senator Reed and I share a strong commitment to reducing and ending homelessness and have included \$2.8 billion for Homeless Assistance Grants. To help our homeless youth—an underserved population—we provide \$80 million for grants. Many members share my concern that young people are “aging out” of the foster care system and have nowhere safe to go. Far too frequently they end up couch surfing or living on the streets, vulnerable to those who would abuse them. To better support youth exiting the foster care system who are at risk of becoming exploited or homeless, the bill also includes \$20 million for Family Unification vouchers.

For our nation's homeless veterans, the bill provides \$40 million for the successful HUD-VASH program. In the land of the brave, there should always be a home for our veterans. Despite the Administration, once again, proposing to eliminate this program, the Committee continues to provide funding. This program has been so successful that it has helped to reduce veterans' homelessness by nearly 50 percent since it was first started in 2010.

Another important issue, particularly to Senator Reed and to me, is dealing with lead paint in homes. That is of particular concern to families with children under the age of six. The bill provides \$290 million to combat lead hazards, an historic level of funding. Lead paint hazards are a significant concern for Maine families, as 57 percent of our housing stock was constructed prior to 1978, the year lead-based paint was banned. These grants will help communities protect children from the harmful effects, what can be lifelong effects, of lead poisoning.

The bill also supports local development efforts by providing \$3.3 billion through the Community Development Block Grant program, another program that the Administration proposed to eliminate but for which we had overwhelming support expressed in letters from our

colleagues. The reason why the CDBG program is so popular is its flexibility—it can be tailored to meet local needs. We also included \$1.4 billion for the HOME program. These two programs support the development of affordable housing and other infrastructure projects and revitalize downtowns. That, in turn, promotes economic development and leads to the creation of more jobs.

I appreciate the opportunity to present this important legislation to the chamber. As we begin debate on the Transportation-HUD bill, I urge my colleagues to support the investments in this bill that benefit our communities all across this nation and the families, veterans, children, and our seniors that rely on these programs.

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