

Effective Transit Systems Connecting Indian Country

by U.S. Senator Tim Johnson

In an era of instant communication, with Facebook and Twitter connecting individuals across countries and spreading information through cyberspace, we are tempted to believe that everyone lives in a world where accessing needed services or gaining life-saving information is a keystroke or car ride away. There are parts of our country, however, where physical isolation is pervasive as poverty and immobility lock the young and old alike into limited opportunities for bettering their livelihood. Many Indian tribes are located in isolated areas of our country, far from the major interstate highway and secondary road network developed in the 20th century. Filling that void is a developing network of transit providers serving tens of thousands, connecting employees to their jobs, providing access to needed medical services, and facilitating intra-reservation trips in Indian Country. With an eye toward major reform of transportation programs in the next transportation bill, it is important that policymakers incorporate the right policies for serving Native populations into this ambitious reorganization of public transportation.

In the 2005 Act (SAFETEA-LU), Congress authorized a first-of-its-kind transit grant program for Indian tribes. Essentially operating as a set aside from the non-urbanized area formula program,

the Tribal Transit Program has demonstrated positive results, and Congress should encourage the development of tribal transit systems by increasing resources for this program. Transit providers serving Indian tribes face many of the same challenges and opportunities of small transit networks in lightly populated states: on demand service for the elderly, disabled or those without access to a car. To help address the challenge of transit in low-density, large land area states and tribes,



I recently introduced legislation that makes a modest formula adjustment correcting for the special challenges of long-distance, low-density travel.

The Rural Transit Improvement and Flexibility Act of 2009 would change the rural transit systems funding distribution formula by

increasing the value assigned to a state's land area from 20 percent to 25 percent. Adjusting the value assigned to land area in relation to population increases the share of funds to exceptionally rural states and Indian tribes. The effect of this change increases the share of rural transit funds to the parts of the country with the highest concentration of transit systems serving Indian Country. With relatively high populations of disabled or elderly citizens, there are also special claims on transit systems operating in the places like South Dakota. Under the current rural transit program, the elderly and disabled program does not allow federal operating and maintenance support. The 2009 bill amends the elderly and disabled program to allow at least 25 percent of these funds to be used for operating expenses. This provision would apply to all states providing grants to support elderly and disabled service, not just those in extremely rural places.

Of course the goals of serving and connecting Native Americans needs go beyond economic development and the freedom from ease of mobility. The United States has a unique government-to-government relationship with Indian tribes across the nation. That relationship includes the federal government's treaty and trust responsibility owed to American Indians. While I continue

"Given the physical and economic isolation of Indian Country, the mobility needs are probably greater than in any other segment of American society."

- Sen. Tim Johnson

my work to see that responsibility fulfilled, programs like these allow tribes to strengthen their sovereignty and empower tribal communities to seek economic development opportunities and broadened infrastructure associated with these transit programs.

As a country, we are stronger when realizing the talents and contributions of all citizens; urban and rural, young and old. The transit providers serving rural America fill a gap in a basic service many of us take for granted. I've witnessed firsthand how an effective transit network opens up opportunities to citizens while making communities stronger. The particular set of challenges to overcome in serving tribes are achievable if we simply remember not to overlook the country's first Americans and remember that their success is ours in this evermore connected and close-knit nation.

Sen. Johnson is a member of the Senate Banking Committee – which has primary jurisdiction for development of the Senate's transportation authorization legislation. He won the Community Transportation Association's Legislator of the Year Award in 2000.

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Tribal Passenger Transportation Technical Assistance Program



The program is designed to assist Native American tribes enhance economic growth and development by improving transportation services. Technical assistance is limited to planning and may support transit service improvements and expansion, system start-up, facility development, development of marketing plans and materials, transportation coordination, training and other public transit problem solving activities.

For more information, contact Charles Rutkowski at rutkowski@ctaa.org or 800.891.0590 x719, or visit www.ctaa.org and click on "Technical Assistance."