

June 2, 2017

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary, U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590

Dear Secretary Chao,

Congratulations on your appointment and confirmation as Secretary of Transportation. We the undersigned organizations write in support of the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (BTS). With infrastructure improvement a priority of the Trump Administration, objective up-to-date statistical data on our nation's transportation are critical for your discussions to ensure taxpayer money is directed where it is most necessary and will best support our economy. We applaud the efforts to make BTS a 21st century statistical agency and urge they be continued. In order for the BTS to continue its important work, further fulfill its potential of providing timely and relevant statistical data, and be a nimble 21st century statistical agency, we urge the Department to give BTS control over its entire annual budget. We also urge (i) easing of administrative burden for more streamlined handling of BTS issues; (ii) transparent reporting of BTS overhead charges, and (iii) funding of overhead in addition to the amount authorized from the HTF.

BTS funding has been frozen at its current budget of \$26 million since 2005, resulting in a cumulative effective cut of 20% since 2005 due to inflation. The drop in purchasing power is compounded by BTS having control over only a fraction of its \$26 million authorized by the U.S. Congress from the Highway Trust Fund (HTF). Our understanding from discussions of the Advisory Council on Transportation Statistics is that BTS has control of only about \$13 million. The net result of frozen funding levels and administrative deductions means that BTS has less than 40-percent of the purchasing power today than it had in 2005. Yet, there has been no accompanying drop in demand for BTS products.

While BTS products are valued by data users and informative to decision making, its budget constraints are felt in many ways. For example, the intercity passenger travel survey has not been done since 1995 and the vehicle inventory and use survey has not been done since 2002, forcing policy makers to make decisions on multi-billion dollar projects on outdated data. It is also possible that BTS could be taking fuller advantage of technological advances and administrative data to expand its product line, but such advances require investments and testing that the agency cannot afford under its current financial constraints.

Granting BTS full control of its \$26 million will also allow it to carry out the new port performance freight statistics program authorized in the 2015 Fixing America's Surface Transportation Act without compromising its other responsibilities.

We support the idea of an agency’s budget including overhead charges for specified items, which is consistent with the practice of some other federal statistical (and other) agencies. However, such overhead costs, should be a small fraction of an agency’s budget and should be transparent. We therefore also ask that overhead costs be funded in addition to the amount currently authorized from the HTF (which was the practice adopted by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health and Human Services in FY2015 when the overhead costs of their statistical agencies were incorporated into a working capitol fund.)

Finally, we understand there are a variety of administrative burdens—particularly regarding IT issues—that can impede BTS innovation as it seeks to be nimble and respond to current trends and needs. We would therefore also ask the assistance of your office in addressing such hurdles.

BTS should have the budget to perform its many important surveys and to be nimble in order to track transportation trends in our dynamic society and economy. BTS produces well-regarded products but has much more potential to reap benefits for our transportation system if provided the resources and capability.

We would welcome a meeting with a member of your staff to further discuss the BTS and how we can be supportive of your efforts. The contact for this letter is Steve Pierson, Director of Science Policy for the American Statistical Association: pierson@amstat.org.

Thank you for your consideration.

AAA	Association of Academic Survey Research Organizations
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety	Consortium of Social Science Associations
American Geosciences Institute	Council of Professional Associations on Federal Statistics
American Highway Users Alliance	Information Technology and Innovation Foundation
American Planning Association	Institute for Transportation and Development Policy
American Public Transportation Association	Intelligent Transportation Society of America
American Road & Transportation Builders Association	National Association for Business Economics
American Society of Civil Engineers	National Association of Regional Councils
American Statistical Association	National Retail Federation
American Trucking Associations	
Association for Public Data Users	

CC: Members of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee
Members of the House Science, Space, and Technology Committee
Members of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee
Members of the Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee