

Prepared Statement of Joel Szabat, Nominee for Under Secretary of
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Chairman Wicker, Ranking Member Cantwell, members of the Committee...

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am grateful that this Committee and your Senate colleagues saw fit to confirm me in my current position as Assistant Secretary for Aviation & International Affairs. I look forward to continuing to work with each of you and your staff to strengthen our Nation's transportation system.

Since June of 2019 I have additionally been performing the duties and responsibilities of the Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, for which position I have been nominated. If confirmed, I will be the seventh Under Secretary of Transportation for Policy, since the post was created in 2002.

It is a measure of my tenure in the Department of Transportation, specifically in the policy office, that I have served under four of the six prior Under Secretaries. My experience runs across each of the last three administrations, including the first Under Secretary (Jeff Shane) and the most recent (Derek Kan). At various times I have run three of the four components that comprise the Office of the Under Secretary: the Office of Aviation and International Affairs; the Office of Policy; and the first multimodal discretionary grant program (TIGER), which has grown into the Build America Bureau.

Over the course of the last twelve months I have sought to perform duties of the Under Secretary consistent with Secretary Chao's vision and our statutory mandate. The Department of Transportation is, first and foremost, a transportation safety agency.

The release of the President's budget on February 10th previewed the Administration's upcoming Surface Transportation Reauthorization proposal. Longer authorizations provide more certainty to local governments, and drive down construction costs. The President's Budget announced a \$1 trillion, ten-year plan. The primary theme will be improvements that benefit safety.

Since the coronavirus arrived in America earlier this year, the Department's major focus has been on battling the disease, and ensuring that our transportation systems support the ongoing economic rebound. That has also become my primary concern, as one of the original members of the White House Coronavirus Task Force.

Following the advice of our nation's health professionals, the DOT coordinated flight restrictions to slow the spread of the virus. We adjusted hazardous material regulations to allow the seamless delivery of testing kits and supplies.

Secretary Chao herself has been outspoken about the need for practices that protect our front-line transportation workers as the economy reopens. We have responded to her direction that ample face coverings be made available to the travelling public, both for their own health, and to protect those who serve them.

As the Centers for Disease Control publishes public health guidelines for safely reopening the economy, we are working through FEMA to secure tens of millions of face coverings for transportation workers – truck and bus drivers, transit and train operators, pilots and flight attendants, air traffic controllers, and many more. These critical transportation workers are unsung heroes in the front lines of fighting the disease. It is an ongoing honor to be able to support them.

Prior to the coronavirus, we were already grappling with the impact of an accelerating rate of technological change across all modes of transportation. As technology rapidly alters the face of transportation it is our duty to keep pace, as a transportation safety agency. A priority of mine, in support of Secretary Chao's vision, is to continue to work to safely integrate emerging technologies, including drones and other autonomous vehicles, into our existing national aviation and surface transportation networks. We are in the process of endorsing a standardized list of advanced driver assistance systems terminologies this year through the *Clearing the Confusion* initiative. By the end of this year we will release the fourth iteration of our Autonomous Vehicle federal guidance.

Nobody yet knows what the 'new normal' will be, when the threat of the coronavirus recedes. Changes in how we live and work will also drive changes in transportation. The Office of the Under Secretary oversees or coordinates the work of hundreds of outstanding research scientists, engineers, statisticians and economists. Some of them are already looking into what changes might emerge, so we are better prepared for them if they do.

Since my expanded role began in the Under Secretary's office a year ago, our important work has continued apace. Through the multimodal BUILD and INFRA programs, and related grant and loan programs within the office, we awarded about \$4 billion to over 100 projects nationwide, annually. In the past twelve months the

Build America Bureau closed five loans in as many states, supporting \$8 billion of needed transportation infrastructure improvements, with the American taxpayers' \$2.2 billion share to be repaid. The Bureau also launched the Railroad Rehabilitation and Improvement Financing Express Program ("RRIF Express") aimed at removing barriers and expediting loans to small railroads.

In aviation, we have quickly implemented our CARES Act mandates to preserve the Essential Air Service program, and to continue scheduled flights to all points served by passenger air carriers receiving financial assistance from the Treasury department. We also provided technical assistance to the Treasury department, and validated which applicants were *bona fide* air carriers. We, in conjunction with the Federal Aviation Administration, coordinated within the Administration, with foreign partners, and with U.S. and foreign airlines to implement flight restrictions to slow the spread of the coronavirus. Today, we are working with the same counterparts to plan for the safe resumption of international air travel.

Our Office of Research and Technology has played a lead role in the past year in advancing the Department's responsibilities in spectrum, and as the civilian federal government lead for the Global Positioning Satellite system. In that capacity, we recommended against the introduction of new broadband that would interfere with GPS, and tested eleven potential backup technologies. We have also advocated for the preservation of the 5.9 GHz "Transportation Safety Band" to allow for the emergence of new technologies, with a plan to deploy connected vehicle technology in 5 million vehicles in five years.

I am especially proud of our role in coordinating and advancing Secretary Chao's signature initiative to fight human trafficking. We received over 200 new commitments from transportation stakeholders through our "One Hundred Pledges in One Hundred Days," outreach campaign. These organizations will train over 1.3 million transportation employees on how to spot trafficking, and help the victims.

Because of necessary social-distancing requirements I cannot be joined today by family, mentors or colleagues. Since she cannot join me, I would like to acknowledge my wife, Chiling Tong, *in absentia*. A prominent Asian Pacific American activist, she worked with a group of mostly Chinese-American organizations that have collectively purchased and distributed over ten million masks and other protective gear for hospitals and emergency services in the greater New York City and Washington D.C. areas. It is this kind of citizen activism that makes Americans, and America, great.

Nearly forty years ago I began my public service as a United States Army cavalry scout and tanker, patrolling the East-West German border. All of us who have worn our country's uniform well-remember the camaraderie of being in a close-knit group, sharing a common mission. That same spirit animates us today. When I tried to thank our DOT coronavirus team for working their 21st straight day, a senior career executive would have none of it. "Most of us chose public service because we wanted to help people," he said. "Now is our time."

I try to live up to that ethos, daily.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear before you today. I am happy to take any questions.