Testimony of the New York State Conference of Mayors
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Submitted to the

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON CORPORATIONS, AUTHORITIES & COMMISSIONS
Senator Leroy Comrie, Chair

SENATE STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
Senator Timothy M. Kennedy, Chair

ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORTATION
Assemblyman William B. Magnarelli, Chair

Joint Hearing to

Examine the Effectiveness of New York State’s Transit Networks

Onondaga Community College
Syracuse, NY
March 22, 2019
On behalf of the New York State Conference of Mayors and the 600 cities and villages we represent, thank you to Senator Comrie, Senator Kennedy, and Assemblyman Magnarelli and all of the committee members for the opportunity to provide testimony on the effectiveness of New York’s transit networks.

I am going to focus my testimony today on a critical aspect of a workable transit system in Upstate New York: safe and reliable local transportation infrastructure. After all, our local and regional transit systems are primary users of and most reliant upon locally constructed and maintained roads and bridges.

Local roads and bridges – which comprise 85% of New York’s entire network of highways, roads and bridges – are integral to the economic and social well-being of our State, but they are in tremendous need of repair. This work cannot be financed by municipalities alone, since such a vast amount of local infrastructure necessitates a strong financial commitment from our partners at the state level. Historically, this essential partnership manifests itself most clearly in the State’s financial investment in the Consolidated Highway Improvement Program (CHIPS). After years of regular increases in CHIPS aid, for the past six State budget cycles this $438 million program has remained frozen. While the State Legislature’s consistent adding/restoring of $65 million in Extreme Winter Recovery monies has been helpful, the state-local transportation partnership continues to wane.

NYCOM greatly appreciates the efforts of Senator Kennedy and the Senate Majority to include a $150 million increase in CHIPS aid in their one-house budget approved earlier this month. The CHIPS program has the potential to help municipalities close their ever-increasing transportation funding gap, but not if the funding levels remain stagnant. An
increase in CHIPS will not only improve the safety of our highways and bridges, but it will grow the economy and enhance the quality of life in all regions of the State.

The need for a significant increase in CHIPS is further exacerbated by the State’s recent enforcement of Federal ADA curb-ramp requirements on all street-paving projects. Local governments are incurring significant additional costs as a result of this requirement. In fact, some municipalities have indicated that the added expense associated with this requirement now consumes a large majority of their entire CHIPS allocation. As your committees and your colleagues work to ensure parity in upstate-downstate transit allocations in the days ahead, I urge you to include increased funding for the statewide CHIPS program – and the local road system it supports – in the final package of transportation funding for 2019-20.

The other transit-supporting funding I would like to focus on today is one operated by local governments in partnership with the State. New York’s arterial maintenance reimbursement program is based upon an important premise: in many instances, municipal road crews are in a better position than the State to more efficiently maintain State highways. Because of this, New York State has agreements with 38 cities throughout New York – including Buffalo, Syracuse and New York City – that maintain State arterial highways passing through their boundaries.

However, the program is not fulfilling its promise because the State’s reimbursement rate of $.85 per square yard paid to cities for maintenance of State arterial highways has not been increased since 1987. As cooperative partners with the State, it is unconscionable that cities are not being made whole for the work they do on behalf of the State. I believe any New Yorker asked to do a 2019 job with a 1987 budget would face the
same issue as these 38 cities do today when it comes to maintaining these roadways. And local taxpayers are picking up the bill, as a result. This is a prime example of a shared service agreement between these cities and the State, except the State needs to be a true partner in this effort.

Based on NYCOM’s analysis, an inflationary increase in the reimbursement rate from the current 1987-based rate would require a new rate of $1.87 per square yard. NYCOM applauds the diligent efforts of Assemblywoman Rozic, Assemblyman Magnarelli and Senator Kennedy in righting this wrong, as they are leading the fight to include a phased-in increase in the arterial maintenance reimbursement rate in this year’s State Budget. The Assembly included such funding in their one-house budget. I urge all members of your committees to join in support of this effort. This minor investment by the State – a $12 million increase over three years – will be of important help to these cities and is the equitable thing to do for your local transportation partners. If the State had to maintain these highways, the State’s fiscal exposure would far exceed the reimbursements that would be paid to cities under this proposal.

Without safe and reliable roadways, commerce and all the vital services that rely on road transport – including bus transit systems – would come to a grinding halt. As legislative leaders in the transportation field, I respectfully ask you to redouble your efforts to wisely increase the investment in municipal transportation infrastructure. The expenditure will reap benefits for transit, our communities and our State.