

United States Senate

January 31, 2017

The Honorable Elaine Chao
Secretary of Transportation
U.S. Department of Transportation
1200 New Jersey Ave SE
Washington, D.C. 20590

Dear Secretary Chao:

Congratulations on your confirmation to be the next Secretary of Transportation. I would like to extend a formal invitation to visit Montana and to see how important our rural transportation infrastructure is to our economy as well as to national connectivity.

As we have discussed, it is important that a comprehensive infrastructure plan leverages private-sector capital as well as recognizes the important role of rural states to national connectivity. Montana serves as a critical link in connecting our Nation. Interstate 90 and Interstate 15 traverse our state, connecting the east and west coasts and our northern and southern borders, respectfully. This extensive system is a pillar of our economy, allowing people and freight to traverse the state and nation. It is also important while developing policies to consider the limited resources of rural states departments of transportation and allow them the flexibility to invest their resources in the most effective way for their states.

While the unemployment rate in Montana is 4.0% (better than the U.S. rate of 4.7%), we are well below the national average at 48th in annual wages per employee, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. We need to focus on creating good-paying jobs. This includes highly skilled welders, machinists, and equipment operators that build our infrastructure.

Another important component to our connectivity is the Essential Air Service (EAS) program. EAS ensures that small, rural communities which would otherwise go without air service have access to the national air transportation system. Regularly scheduled air service plays an important role in rural commerce. Montana has the second most communities of any state in the contiguous U.S. connected by EAS. Without this service, many Montanans would be more than 250 miles from the nearest commercial air service.

As we have also discussed, while Americans have historically been connected via roads, rail, and air, today connectivity is also dependent on communications infrastructure. In Montana, connectivity has removed geography as a barrier and has fostered a thriving business community. Our Nation's infrastructure development should be holistic and include fiscally responsible policies such as "dig once" to support the expansion of broadband deployment.

I look forward to hosting you in Montana and working closely on conventional infrastructure and general connectivity, to make America's infrastructure great again, and support sustained economic growth.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Steve Daines". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a horizontal line underlining the name.

STEVE DAINES
United States Senator