

**2008 Rail~Volution Speech
San Francisco, CA
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Congressman Earl Blumenauer, 3rd District, Oregon, United States Congress

Being wedged into the program here, making it kind of long, reminds me of a comment by Mo Udall, "Everything's been said; unfortunately for you, not everyone had said it."

At the beginning of the 110th Congress, I took the opportunity to move from the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee to the Ways and Means Committee because we have to figure out how to get some money to make all these visions happen -- and after having agitated for some time to get infrastructure into economic stimulus package, lo and behold, they actually scheduled the hearing on precisely that subject tomorrow, leaving me with the choice of being here, talking about what I hope they'd do, or of being back in Washington actually doing it. I chose to go back, although it has, unfortunately, complicated this schedule a little, so I appreciate your forbearance.

It is great to be back in the Bay Area. You know, this conference was scheduled to be here a few days after Sept. 11, 2001. We ended up shifting the conference to later in the fall and it was a spectacular conference, but there's something about cataclysmic New York events -- we're in the middle of one now -- and the fall and Rail~Volution in San Francisco.....

But it's great to be in San Francisco. I would like to begin by thanking the people of the Bay Area for sending us Nancy Pelosi as Speaker of the House. She is not just the most powerful Italian since Julius Caesar, the most powerful woman in the world; she is poised to be the most influential Speaker when it comes to infrastructure since Henry Clay. Nancy gets it; she's been focused on it; she's been working for the last couple of years promoting this vision to Rebuild and Renew America, and we are lucky to have her as House Speaker. I keep bumping into this woman all over the country: in Phoenix two weeks ago, and then in Portland last week. Last night I tried to see if we could get her

here today, but the timing, just before the election, made that impossible. But she does send her greetings to you. And from my vantage point, I'd rather have her off doing what she's doing than have her here today.

I deeply appreciate what Bill Millar was talking about. Every year, he focuses on the state of transit and every year I have these sort of, "Whoa – is this really happening?" experiences.

When I started an effort to be an advocate of what we're doing in Portland, taking this message to other parts of the country, I remember going to places like Houston and Phoenix, the #1 and #2 per-capita auto-use cities in the nation, where there was no land use in one, and it doesn't matter in the other. Yet just a few months ago, at the Wind Energy Conference in Houston, I had to get out of the way because a light rail car was going down the street – in Houston! In Texas! There've been significant changes in Phoenix as well, where I've been doing some work this year with some of our people. I can remember being down there about 20 years ago, debating some Libertarian whacko on the ValTrans campaign for then-Mayor Terry Goddard and feeling like my life was at risk. Some of you were there – you know what this is like. And now, they've got a light rail line! These are all rail cities: not only Houston and Phoenix, but Salt Lake City and Denver and all sorts of other places around the country where people are getting it. I find this extraordinarily exciting.

And that's exactly why Rail~Volution was created, to give us an opportunity to come together, to have a chance to be challenged by examples, to meet one another, to share good and bad examples and horror stories, to drag some skeptics here, to be able to interact and maybe be encouraged, or at least test our mettle – and to think about where we're going.

There has never been a more important time for us to come together -- not just to encourage and inform and educate, but to think about how to take advantage of the circumstances we face, because -- as you may have noticed -- the economy is crashing,

our politics are in an uproar, our financial system is falling apart, our deficits are soaring, we have faced 20 consecutive months of falling home values, we're seeing plunging auto sales -- who would have thought we would be happy to see oil prices at \$65 a barrel? Oh, and we appear to be losing the battle with global warming.

In the words of John McCain describing the downward trajectory of his campaign, "We've got 'em right where we want 'em!" Right? <laughter> Right?

We *do* have the nation's attention. In a curious but profound way, we have the American public where, in fact, we want them. We wouldn't have worked for these circumstances, but we cannot afford to miss this opportunity. To those of us who are committed to a new vision of what America should be and where it's going, this is the time of our challenge and our opportunity.

We have, in a perverse way, reached the position where our economic, energy, fiscal, and development patterns are simply not sustainable, where the only viable solution is a future of livable communities where our families are safe, healthy and economically secure. This is what this conference is all about. That's what you and I have spent our education, our professional lives, our political and civic activities learning how to do. This is why we started this program, 17 years ago in Portland. I must confess, listening to Stuart [Cohen], that I find no small amount of irony in the fact that California is determined to link infrastructure investments, especially transportation, to comprehensive planning. Wow -- who could have seen *that* coming? What an idea! <laughter>

It was what we did in Oregon 35 years ago, and we've spent two decades helping to build and refine a Portland model that actually has some of those results. I'm not going to bore you with the Portland Story -- because I'm sick of it -- but we're seeing communities and neighborhoods across the country embracing these principles; we're finding out that they work. And in this room are people who have been involved in creating those developments, revitalizing those neighborhoods, spreading the gospel in places that haven't always been so hospitable. We're seeing some of these ideas coming out of

tragedies like Katrina, where all of a sudden people are finding out that they make a difference. The four Mississippi counties and three Louisiana parishes destroyed by Katrina didn't even have building codes. Mass transit isn't just to move people who don't know how to drive or can't afford it; there's a fundamental security issue of being able to quickly and efficiently move people out of harm's way. Think of those pictures of people in Houston trying to escape Hurricane Rita, pushing their SUVs that had run out of gas.

We're in the midst of the most tumultuous and meaningful period of American politics and public policy -- not just in our lifetime, not just since the Great Depression, but since the middle of the 19th century. I truly believe you have to go back to the Civil War to find this sort of churn, opportunity, and threat. After all, the New Deal was just a way to recover from an economic meltdown. Our challenge is whether we can simultaneously deal with numerous critical issues of the day: policy as opposed to politics; our entire philosophy of government; the fiscal reconnection; the role of government in economic regulation and oversight; the role in government of financing the private sector; and the allocation of social responsibilities. How do we readjust the expectations that have been at the core of how Americans have organized their lives for the last two generations, how they have planned for their children's education, and their own retirement? These questions are already sending profound shockwaves through America's self-defined, broad-based, middle class.

If we follow our past patterns, we are doomed to continue our downward spiral. And, of course, lurking in the background is something that doesn't get enough attention: the demographic shifts that will completely realign who we are, where and how we live. If you haven't spent time with Chris Nelson's research, I think it's really absolutely essential for every one of us in this business to think about this Baby Boomer tidal wave. Every 8 seconds, another one of us turns fifty. In a few short years there will be more single-person households than families with children. We have a country that has been developed for centuries on erratically different paradigm. Are we really aware -- not to mention equal to -- the simultaneous and interrelated challenges that are crashing down on us?

The short answer is that we must be. There is a role for each and every one of us in this room to play; we each have a specific contribution to make to this effort. The key to making progress is to bring people together and sort it out.

A number of us have been on a crusade for several years now to create, implement, and unleash a vast constituency to Rebuild and Renew America in ways that engage the economy, reduce our carbon footprint, and create a more rational framework in which to live. Our role is to help fellow citizens understand the challenges and opportunities and develop a vision that pulls these elements together. I appreciate the example that Stuart gave because it reflects repeatedly on what I have experienced. There have been times in Portland where what we were doing seemed counterintuitive to a lot of people, but when they were given a chance to understand the factors and to shape their own destiny – you know, magic things happened. Nobody wants to live in a “densified” neighborhood – but lots of people discovered that they might like to live in communities with historic population levels that supported streetcars. It’s not more people that make neighbors cranky; it’s their cars, and the fact that they don’t have any other choice but to drive them everywhere.

I want to be clear. We need to be moving out of this room today -- and at every similar conference or convocation that we attend -- ready to help citizens shape their vision for their own communities, in their own setting. We do need more money, I will be the first to admit it -- which is why I’m going to get on a plane in a couple of hours and be at that Ways and Means Committee hearing and thinking and speaking in other areas around the country about ways to approach and finance our future. You know -- I cringe when I see the bottled water here, but it’s such a great metaphor -- people don’t want to pay five cents a gallon more in gasoline taxes, but they will pay *twenty six dollars and seventy cents a gallon* for something that they can get from their taps for free, simply because they are convinced of its value.

Now is the time for us to translate that value in terms of things that really matter. And one of the things that we have going for us is that value proposition. Today, we have new opportunities to create and capture value, to squeeze more out of what we already have. We must not be afraid to promote the simplest of concepts, like the bicycle, which is the most efficient form of urban transportation ever designed... except for the foot.

<applause>

At a time when we're concerned about the health status of each and every American, when we are facing a crisis of morbidly obese, 400-lb 6th graders, when people are worried about their blood pressure – we can scan the radius (Pi-R-squared, right?) around a transit station and think about where people will walk. And if you double that 1/4 –mile walkable radius, you quadruple the development area – and vastly increase the walkable destinations. If you triple that radius, you get nine times the development area – and an entire community of walkable destinations. These simple, fundamental concepts can serve us well.

We need to make sure that our government leads by example. Our government should be reforming the process and reconfiguring partnerships, not just providing resources where necessary. It should be providing regulatory clarity and insisting on local matches to leverage federal contributions. No more free federal money. <applause> Nada.

Everybody's got to have some skin in the game. It doesn't matter if it's a people mover or artificial beach construction; if there is a meaningful local contribution, it's going to help make it a better project. At the same time, maybe it's time for a uniform match ratio?

<applause> No more having the match ratio determine the 'best' solution. We're still recovering from all that free federal money to build the interstate freeway system (actually, it was more than 'free,' when you look at the entire economic impact) versus money out of your own pocket if you're going to expand the transit system. Hmm, "Free Money?" or "Pay for It Yourself?" Kind of makes every solution look like a road. Let's not pay people more to pave a creek than to restore a wetland. Let's put some rationality in here and give you choices based on what makes more sense for your community, not

some bureaucratic formula that at one point may have made sense, but probably doesn't today. <applause>

We need to make sure that the federal government gets its own house in order beyond reauthorization [of the federal transportation bill]. We've got brilliant people here to talk about it and I've made too many speeches on it. Well, let's make an equally high priority out of how the federal government deals with its own energy conservation, its own environmental cleanup, and how and where we build federal facilities. No more hitchhiking to the welfare office because you can't get there on transit. Let's make it a priority to insist that the federal government buy the most energy-efficient vehicles and treat our employees fairly. If the federal government -- the largest landowner, landlord, and employer in the country -- would simply model the behavior we want the rest of America to follow, it would be transformational. Then -- and only then -- should we talk about new revenue.

Rebuilding and Renewing America ought to be the fundamental organizing principle for the new administration and the new Congress. It's an unparalleled opportunity. I appreciate the work that the T4America has done, painting a picture for the next administration and the next Congress about how to lead the economic recovery in ways that strengthen us. We're going to have an economic stimulus package, maybe as early as next month if the Bush Administration will allow it. Finally, we'll have an economic stimulus and economic recovery package that deals with infrastructure. But if it doesn't happen in November, it will be in the first 100 days of the next administration. I have my own ideas about who I would like to lead it <laughter> but I think we're going to be in a position to see it move forward. We are going to be involved with the reassessment of the economic fundamentals of government operation; we're looking at climate change legislation that allows some element of carbon pricing -- it's one thing that both Senators McCain and Obama agree on -- that will create and transfer vast amounts of revenue. Let's use a little bit of that revenue to reduce our carbon footprint and rebuild and renew America.

We also have more citizens paying attention to the affairs of state than we have had in generations. In more than a third of a century in public office, I've not seen anything like the flood of information and outreach that has reached my office this year. As I've been campaigning around the country with many of our candidates, talking about infrastructure and rebuilding and renewing America, people of all ages are there; they're dialed in. Our challenge is to put these pieces together: reauthorization, the economic stimulus, global warming, what we're doing at the state and local level. You have an approach that integrates all the elements people are hungry for. And when we get together, when we roll up our sleeves, there is a chord that is struck, not just for what's happening locally, but a growing consensus for what a great new national vision could be.

I appreciate your willingness to be a part of this conference and I appreciate what you're doing in your own communities. I'm looking forward to working with you in the next 50 days to influence the new administration, in the next 50 weeks on reauthorization and the tax code, and in the next 50 months of the next administration, to pull these pieces together.

We've got them right where we want them.

Thank you very much. <applause>