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## Snoble's Congressional Testimony Suggests Fixes to New Starts Program

By NED RACINE

(May 11, 2007) Appearing before a U.S. House subcommittee yesterday morning, CEO Roger Snoble recommended five improvements to the New Starts and Small Starts programs that would make the programs less onerous to local transit agencies.

Testifying before the Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Highways and Transit as part of its hearings on the two Federal Transit Administration (FTA) programs, Snoble noted that increased federal involvement in local project development has become a burden for local project sponsors.

Referring to federal oversight that has grown "to the point of micro-management," Snoble offered five suggestions for improving the FTA's New Starts program in its next reauthorization by Congress:

- Recognize True Allocation of Risk
- Streamline and Simplify the New Starts Rating Process
- Establish a Bilateral Commitment to Timeframes
- Reduce Time Frame From Record of Decision to Construction
- Provide Increased New Starts Funding to Address the Nationwide Demand

Chairman Rep. Peter A. DeFazio, (D-Oregon) of the subcommittee read aloud a portion of Snoble's testimony detailing the significant delay between issuance of a Record of Decision and the Full Funding Grant Agreement (FFGA). Rep. DeFazio asked James S. Simpson, FTA Administrator, to comment on that portion of Snoble's testimony.

Before offering his suggestions for improving the New Starts program, Snoble illustrated his contention that "there have been too many projects nationwide chasing too few Federal dollars."

Snoble stated that if only "100 of the 250 SAFETEA-LU authorized New



Testifying before the U.S. House Transportation and Infrastructure Subcommittee on Highways and Transit yesterday morning, CEO Roger Snoble noted that increased federal involvement in local project development has become a burden for local project sponsors. Photo by David Kim.

Starts projects were constructed, at an average cost of \$500 million, the total demand would be \$50 billion in public funding." Even if the current New Starts funding program grew by 5% per year for the next 10 years, it would provide only approximately \$18 billion.

In trying to determine which projects receive federal funding, the New Starts evaluation system has become increasingly complex and detailed, according to Snoble, who reminded the subcommittee that Metro has built transit projects with and without federal New Starts funding.

While complimenting the project evaluation system for fostering management tools valuable to local agencies designing and building new transit projects, Snoble cautioned that the "unreasonably onerous" New Starts process obstructs a New Starts program goal, "to assist urban areas in building critically needed transit systems in a cost effective manner."

Citing Metro's estimate that the Federal New Starts process can add one to two years to the project schedule and 10 to 15 percent to its cost, Snoble pointed to a lack of evidence that this level of oversight improves project success. "We have not found in Los Angeles that the current micro-management level of Federal oversight has any actual, demonstrable yield in terms of project success or performance."

Snoble also testified that the FTA's method of measuring a project's cost effectiveness means "potential subway alternatives are all but eliminated from consideration, even if it is the most pragmatic solution in a densely populated urban corridor. As one of the more densely populated regions in the country, this places Los Angeles at a disadvantage."

FTA Administrator Simpson was also asked by subcommittee member John J. Duncan, Jr. (R-Tennessee) to cite examples of successful Small Starts projects. Simpson mentioned the Metro Rapid System Gap Closure Project as one of four projects funded in President Bush's budget and commented that it will do much to improve transit in Los Angeles.