



March 4, 2021

The Honorable Thomas R. Carper, Chairman
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito, Ranking Member
Committee on Environment and Public Works
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Carper and Ranking Member Capito:

On February 24, the Committee held its first legislative hearing, “Building Back Better: Investing in Transportation while Addressing Climate Change, Improving Equity, and Fostering Economic Growth”. You are to be commended for leading the committee in prioritizing this initial hearing on investments in the nation’s transportation system and how that framework intersects with climate adaptation and serves as a core component of the national conversation on resilient infrastructure. As your committee and all of the 117th Congress considers a robust infrastructure investment package, the BuildStrong Coalition is focused on our role and responsibility to advocate for laws, policies, and programs that aid in the creation of a disaster resilient nation. We remain ready to continue the work we have conducted with your colleagues in previous legislative sessions and are prepared to serve as a resource to advance your commitment to enhancing our country’s resilience profile.

The BuildStrong Coalition, formed in 2011 to respond to an increasing number of severe disasters, is made up of a diverse group of members representing firefighters, emergency responders, emergency managers, insurers, engineers, architects, contractors, and manufacturers, as well as consumer organizations, code specialists, and many others committed to building a more disaster resilient nation.

As a coalition that has actively and successfully engaged with Congressional leaders to investigate causes of, and devise the solutions to, the rising cost of disasters in the U.S., in the face of growing climate risk we offer the following policy recommendations that will be critical to driving community resilience and which we feel should be included as part of investments in the nation’s transportation system and other critical areas of lifeline infrastructure:

I. Drive Resilient Homes and Communities through Strong Building Codes

Congress should create incentives for building stronger and tie existing federal funding streams to the adoption and enforcement of strong, modern building codes, in order to better protect homes, families, and communities.

Individuals and communities are kept safe in times of disasters through the strength of their homes and the infrastructure that provides critical resources and services in affected areas. This is particularly prevalent as we learn lessons from COVID-19 and begin to understand how to increase



resilience to wildfires. Disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and the use of stronger building codes have been proven to save lives, reduce the damage of natural disasters, and protect the environment. Unfortunately, only a handful of states have adopted the most modern building codes, and many lack the resources to adequately implement codes. To help correct this paradigm at the federal level involves creating incentives that encourage state and local governments to adopt modern building codes, while simultaneously equipping communities with the tools and resources needed to carry out meaningful enforcement regimes.

II. Resilient Lifeline Infrastructure

Congress should require investments in lifeline infrastructure and those resources should be directed at risk-reducing, cost effective investments to promote the hardening of lifeline infrastructure and disaster-resilient construction and the adoption and implementation of risk-reducing standards.

Lifeline infrastructure refers to electric power, water and wastewater systems, natural gas and liquid fuel, telecommunication, and transportation. Disruptions in these systems due to disasters threaten lives and impede community recovery. By investing in the resilience of these systems, we can reduce, if not eliminate, the impact of disasters, allowing key infrastructure to be restored and reducing the duration and cost of recovery. Through the application of the highest building codes, standards, and technologies to these systems and ensuring access to resources to invest in mitigation by non-profit owners of infrastructure, we can ensure system-wide increases in resilience in key lifeline infrastructure.

Disaster-resilient and sustainable construction and infrastructure is important to reduce the damage of natural disasters and protect the environment. This involves applying the highest codes and standards and leveraging resources to support and incentivize the adoption and enforcement of building codes and professional standards. This includes standards that strengthen materials against all hazards including wind, flood, seismic, and ice. Most importantly, all disaster recovery and mitigation projects should incorporate smart technologies to improve monitoring and distribution for lifeline infrastructure and require the use of resilient and non-combustible materials standards for lifeline infrastructure.

III. More Resources for Resilience and Mitigation

Congress should increase the funding for retrofits and investments in resilience before the next disaster, climate impact, or catastrophic failure.

The infrastructure conversation is an opportunity to influence the overall national resilience strategy. This is the framework for the next chapter in increasing disaster resilience in the U.S, including how disaster resilience intersects with adaptation and responds to climate impacts, and is a core component of the national resilience conversation. We know that mitigation increases resiliency and saves lives, property, and taxpayer money. Mitigation also saves the environment. But the federal resources to help build state and local capacity and fund risk-reducing, cost-effective mitigation projects that invest in hardening homes and critical lifeline infrastructure are woefully inadequate.



IV. Incentivize Individual Investments in Resilience

Congress should incentivize investments in resilience through tax benefits, grant conditions, and easing administrative burdens.

In addition to more resources for mitigation and communities, both public and private entities need incentives to drive their investments in mitigation. Whether by supporting the creation of federal tax incentives that reward resilient behavior, the development of mitigation tax breaks, or other incentives, individuals and businesses will find it easier to invest in resiliency, including undertaking activities like retrofitting homes, if these resources are available. This would also foster private sector investment in mitigation through new financing opportunities. Targeted tax incentives and removing tax penalties will encourage resilient construction techniques to withstand damage from strong winds or flooding and prevent losses from wildfires and seismic events. Through these investments, homeowners and communities ultimately save money through tax savings and avoided recovery costs and losses in the next disaster.

V. Use Resilient American Products

Congress should ensure the use of resilient, American-made products in the construction and retrofit of lifeline infrastructure.

Now more than ever, we need to support American jobs and American products. An investment in resilience across American communities must include long-term, non-emergency construction projects that maximize the use of American-made goods, products, and materials. These efforts create jobs and fuel the economic engines in our communities.

VI. Build Capacity

Congress should ensure that state, local, tribal, and regional entities are given the tools and resources to increase capacity and capability to identify risks and hazards and mitigate those risks before the crisis occurs.

It is clear that for this country to be successful in enhancing our resiliency, we must focus on capacity building for state and local governments and turn to considerations of sustainability, adaptability, and creative financial instruments that can be leveraged to drive socially responsible investments in resilience. State, local, and tribal governments must increase their ability to mitigate against all hazards. Accordingly, they must increase their ability to identify hazards and successfully implement these funds to accomplish selected risk-reducing projects. Increased engagement and education efforts on mitigation planning, program requirements, and opportunity awareness will enhance community resilience across all levels of government.

Further, regulatory controls must be loosened to facilitate and encourage public-private partnerships. Governments must work with the private sector to increase community and national resilience. The private sector is currently conducting high-level work throughout the resilience and mitigation arena and there is tremendous opportunity to utilize expertise and industry knowledge, take advantage of existing programs, identify best practices, and incorporate lessons learned from the private sector. By leveraging the private sector and encouraging and facilitating public-private partnerships, we can maximize available resources for the benefit of the entire country.



Conclusion

The BuildStrong Coalition and its members stand ready to partner with Congress as it considers historic legislation regarding the nation's transportation infrastructure. We would be honored to present subject matter experts, data, and best practices, as well as participants in hearings, roundtables, and briefings — a role we have filled many times in the past. We are excited to join congressional leaders like you as we identify opportunities for policy changes that promote disaster resilience and the smart investment of federal resources to address our country's vulnerable homes and communities, aging infrastructure, and the increasing number of severe and costly weather events. Together, we can help save the lives and property of our citizens.

Sincerely,

Jimi Grande
Chairman
BuildStrong Coalition

Phil Anderson
President
BuildStrong Coalition