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The Honorable Pam Byrnes
Speaker Pro Tempore
Chair, House Committee on Transportation
State Capitol, Room 251
P.O. Box 30014
Lansing, MI 48909

Dear Chairwoman Byrnes:

I am writing to offer my support for House Bill 6128 and the H-1 substitute for that bill. As you may know, I have spent much of the last 10 years working on large industrial transportation-related projects in Southwest Detroit, both as a community activist and as State Representative and member of the House Transportation Committee. During that time, I helped create and chaired the Outreach Committee of Communities for a Better Rail Alternative (CBRA) to engage the community in the Detroit Intermodal Freight Terminal (DIFT) project. I conducted quarterly meetings with MDOT on the Gateway Project to connect the Ambassador Bridge plaza directly to the interstate system and mitigate impacts on the community. And I helped residents in the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC) neighborhood form the Delray Community Benefits Coalition to advocate for community benefits.

I have supported all three of the projects identified above because I believe they make good public policy and they have the potential to insure that our state capitalizes on its strategic location along global supply chain routes to create good, high-paying jobs in the 21st Century. Failing to make these kind of infrastructure investments is a quick road to economic stagnation.

Michigan is the largest trading partner state with Canada, America's largest trading partner. We also are the third largest trading partner state with Mexico, surpassed only by California and Texas. Simply put, Michigan possesses a significant opportunity to continue its status as The Great Trade state if it makes these kind of investments. That is why I authored legislation to create the Michigan Supply Chain Commission, so that our state could insure broad support for these wise investments, instead of the extreme ideological and pandering politics we have seen around most infrastructure issues.

My support for the DIFT, Gateway, and DRIC, however, has never been a blind faith in any highway, interstate, rail yard, or bridge. Rather it has been based upon the research demonstrating economic need and growth from these investments. Michigan did not become the automotive manufacturing leader of the 20th century without investing in roads, bridges, rail, ports, and airports to support that economic activity. And it will not continue its status as a trade leader if it does not make future investments.

As noted, my support for and participation in the DIFT, Gateway, and DRIC has always centered on mitigating the negative community and environmental impacts of these massive infrastructure projects, whose economic benefits extend to the region, but whose immediate costs are borne by the local or "host" community. I have both screamed at and championed the work of MDOT during this process. Ten years ago as we began the DIFT planning, a project was designed to create eleven truck entrances to the rail yard in the heart of the residential community of Southwest Detroit, the city's only growing residential population. Through the advocacy of CBRA, as well as the listening and partnership of MDOT, the project was redesigned to incorporate only two entrances to the yard and to locate the entrances on major truck routes, instead of neighborhood residential streets.

I could give a number of examples of improvements that MDOT has made to the DIFT, Gateway, and DRIC based upon dialogue, meeting, listening, and partnership with the residents, businesses, churches, and community organizations of Southwest Detroit. That being said, more needs to be done, including for the Detroit River International Crossing (DRIC).

Communities throughout the country have been utilizing a new tool to address impacts on the host community from large infrastructure projects, corporate investments and locations, and the creation of negative externalities that can accompany such projects. The construction of the Staples Center and expansion of the Los Angeles Airport both contained Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) that created legally-binding, contractual mechanisms to address community concerns about these projects. The Dearborn Street Goodwill project in Seattle, the Consol Energy Center arena (for the Penguins hockey team) in Pittsburgh, San Francisco's Bayview-Hunters Point residential development, the Gates-Cherokee redevelopment project in Denver, and the Ballpark Village development in San Diego also have used CBAs. Other CBA agreements have been used in Atlanta, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Haven, New York City, Philadelphia, San Jose, Syracuse, Washington, D.C., and Wilmington.

House Bill 6128 and the H-1 substitute, in particular, create a framework to develop a community benefits agreement around the DRIC project. It reflects what Delray and Southwest Detroit residents have been requesting of MDOT and U.S. Federal Highway Administration throughout the DRIC planning process. I have joined them in my public and private comments on the project in this request. The Delray CBC has hosted national leaders in the field of CBAs, such as the Partnership for Working Families and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE) to discuss various community benefits for the DRIC project.

To be fair, MDOT has worked to help address many of these issues. While some residents have been satisfied with the improvements and community investments that were created through the DRIC planning process, others believe that more needs to be done. In particular, the local sourcing of jobs and the environmental air quality issues need more specificity and investment as the project moves forward. To date, MDOT has not offered to create a legally-binding CBA with the Delray Community Benefits Coalition, but has preferred to address concerns through specific project improvements.

The model for insuring that needed infrastructure and other projects for local communities has been well established in other urban areas throughout America. If Michigan is going to have a successful 21st Century economy, then it needs to make the kinds of investments that will get us there. We cannot afford to repeat the kind of devastation urban communities in Michigan and throughout America experienced in the mid- to late-20th Century from the creation of the interstate system. A new model has been developed to insure that a small portion of these investments address community concerns.

House Bill 6128 and the H-1 substitute provide a fair and equitable process to realize these goals. As Michigan moves forward, I truly believe that an established CBA process will ease the negotiating process for MDOT's infrastructure. It also will provide a path for private sector companies to engage their communities, if they so choose, to insure that local concerns are being addressed: a path that is not being pursued currently and that is the cause of much of the opposition that these companies experience.

Michigan can ill afford to the kind of bickering and uncertainty that has been created around our border investments, business tax structure, and school funding. We need to establish sound processes that allow interests to come to the table and reach solutions. House Bill 6128 achieves that end. It is a wise and forward-looking concept that has a proven track record in other areas around the country.

I urge your support.

Sincerely,

Steve Tobocman
Former House Majority Floor Leader and
State Representative, 12th District - Detroit