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Statement of Congressman John Larson (CT-01)

before the Connecticut General Assembly Transportation Committee regarding

**S.B. 501, AN ACT CONCERNING THE CONSTRUCTION OF TUNNELS FOR INTERSTATE
ROUTES 84 AND 91 IN THE HARTFORD REGION**

February 27, 2017

I testify in strong support of S.B. 501, "An Act Concerning the Construction of Tunnels for Interstate Routes 84 and 91 In the Hartford Region" and applaud the bill's sponsors, Senator Tim Larson, Senator John Fonfara, and Co-Chair Carlo Leone. I thank Chairman Tony Guerrera, Co-Chair Toni Boucher, Ranking Member Devin Carney and the rest of the Transportation Committee for holding a hearing on this forward-thinking legislation.

The Greater Hartford Region faces significant infrastructure challenges. The I-84 viaduct in Hartford is congested and in need of repair. Currently, it splits Hartford in two—cutting off residents and businesses in the North End from the rest of the city. At the same time, I-91 has deprived Hartford of waterfront property along the Connecticut River that could otherwise be used for recreation or development. And perhaps most worrisome, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has identified upgrades to our aging levee system that must be made in order to keep our communities safe from floods.

These challenges offer an opportunity to fix the planning mistakes of the past, invest in job creation and economic growth, and to transform our region for generations to come. Rather than taking a piecemeal approach, we need to reunite Hartford, recapture the Connecticut Riverfront, and repair our crumbling levees. S.B. 501, to authorize construction of tunnels for I-84 and I-91, is exactly the type of legislation that is needed.

The approach outlined in this bill is a 100 Year Vision. This plan would bury I-84 in a tunnel beneath much of Hartford and into East Hartford. A second tunnel would bury I-91 along the

Connecticut River, allowing us to finally recapture the waterfront. Tunneling will allow us to repair our eroding levee systems before a tragedy happens. Importantly, routing I-84 and I-91 through tunnels would allow us to keep the existing viaduct open until the new routes are open—preventing a costly shutdown of our highways and the city as a whole. Once the tunnels are in place, the Aetna Viaduct would be removed and we would return those streets to local boulevards, providing acres of green spaces and developable land for Hartford — transforming the city into a livable, walkable community.

Tunneling would also alleviate the severe traffic congestion along our highways and bridges. A significant portion of the vehicles causing congestion on I-84 and I-91 are just passing through. The current right-of-way cannot accommodate an expansion of capacity and a building a beltway system simply is not a viable option. Directing that traffic through a tunnel bypass would allow it to flow through smoothly without clogging up local roads or interfering with drivers bound for Hartford.

East Hartford would also be transformed. Currently, the “mixmaster” of off-ramps and on-ramps alongside the Connecticut River has roughly the same footprint as Hartford’s own downtown neighborhood. Removing the mixmaster would allow this valuable property to be reclaimed and repurposed.

On top of this, returning the Bulkeley, Founders, and Charter Oak Bridges to the boulevards they once were would open both sides of the river to local traffic, pedestrians, and bicyclists. Connecting our newest National Historic Park—Coltsville—to the Connecticut River would also increase interest in tourism. Hartford and East Hartford will be transformed into livable, interconnected, and vibrant communities that will attract businesses and new residents alike.

This plan has the support of businesses and stakeholders such as MetroHartford Alliance, Connecticut Construction Industries Association (CCIA), Travelers, St. Francis Hospital, and Trinity Health. They are rightly concerned about the specter of the city being shut down for potentially years during construction of the viaduct replacement. They understand the importance of improved mobility and livable communities for attracting and retaining their workforce and they understand that investing in infrastructure will create jobs and stimulate the economy. I applaud the Connecticut Department of Transportation for including a study of this tunnel proposal as a part of their ongoing I-84/I-91 interchange study and I will continue to work in close collaboration with Commissioner Redeker to find the best solution for our region’s infrastructure.

In January, I hosted a workshop in Washington, DC with stakeholders from our region with the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Build America Bureau to brainstorm and discuss how to move this tunnel project forward. This newly established office at the U.S. DOT is a “one-stop shop” for project sponsors to be able to access federal transportation grant and finances projects and to break down silos. At this workshop, we had the opportunity to drill down on best practices for project develop and we learned about options for innovative finance. It was an

incredibly productive meeting and demonstrated that where there is community will, the federal government will be there to help support big projects that will have an outsized impact.

I am proud to have a close working relationship with Congressman Bill Shuster, the Chairman of the U.S. House Transportation Committee and have hosted him here in Connecticut on multiple occasions. He has had the opportunity to see the infrastructure challenges our communities face. He gets it, he is supportive of this plan, and he has committed to helping us at the federal level.

While it's true Washington is a divisive place these days, infrastructure is an area where Democrats, Republicans, and the Trump Administration can come together. I am going to be working my tail off in Congress to make progress on a major federal infrastructure package. Connecticut must be ready and waiting with our bags packed with a project like this so that we aren't left at the station. This legislation is exactly what is needed and I reiterate my strong support.