

Opening Statement
Ranking Member Val Demings
Hearing on “Examining Environmental Barriers to Infrastructure Development”
March 1, 2017

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling today’s hearing concerning barriers to infrastructure development.

I certainly support new projects aimed at repairing the nation’s crumbling infrastructure and expanding the infrastructure to meet the needs of the population and modern commerce.

There are significant barriers to achieving that goal.

Inadequate federal funding for infrastructure is a significant barrier. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, \$3.6 trillion in new investment is needed to fix the nation’s network of bridges, roads, waterways, levees and dams.

Inadequate staffing at federal agencies to process development applications is a significant barrier. President Trump’s hiring ban will worsen backlogged development permit applications because vacant positions cannot be filled and more civil servants are approaching the age of retirement.

But environmental protection laws are not a significant barrier.

Some opponents of the the National Environmental Policy Act or NEPA say that NEPA is the primary cause of delays. Not so. In fact, 95 percent of major actions that are reviewable under NEPA are considered to be part of the categorical exclusion, which means that they do not require environmental analysis.

Even with the remaining five percent of major projects that require additional environmental review, NEPA does not constrain the agency if the agency determines that the benefits of a particular development project outweigh its environmental impacts.

I for one do not want to return to the days before NEPA. At that time, the public had virtually no input into public infrastructure projects, even if it literally ran through their backyard. The only considerations for major public projects like the Interstate Highway System were whether there was an available open space and whether the acquisition cost was low for that space.

It did not matter if this available open space was a historic site or a public park. It did not even matter whether the space was not open in some instances.

Often infrastructure was built on the backs of the urban poor and minorities. For example, a segment of I-4 was constructed directly between Parramore, a community on the outskirts of downtown Orlando, Florida, and the growing business district.

Prior to I-4 construction, Parramore was a thriving African-American community with several successful civic organizations, black-owned businesses including a tailor shop, a theater, and several professional offices. Dr. William Monroe Wells, a prominent physician, opened a hotel and the South Street Casino which hosted now-legendary jazz and blues performers.

Unfortunately, the interstate highway that helped make Orlando, the vacation capital of the United States, had disastrous consequences for one of Central Florida's most thriving African-American communities. Built along the historic Division Street, named for the segregation boundary in Post-War Orlando, I-4 displaced 551 homes and severed access to downtown Orlando.

For decades, Parramore struggled to remain a strong community. The neighborhood that once boasted more than 10,000 resident dwindled to 5,200 by 1980, while movie theaters, libraries, grocery stores, and community centers closed their doors.

Fortunately, for Parramore, and neighborhoods like it across the country, federal, state, and municipal officials understand that communities always do better when those impacted have a seat at the table.

We do not want to return to that past where the federal government steamrolls a vibrant town without a second thought.

NEPA was designed to prevent that from happening. A Republican President signed it into law in 1970. One of the primary goals of NEPA is to give the public a meaningful opportunity to learn and comment on federal government actions **before** decisions are made. We want to encourage and maintain this sort of transparency.

Finally, we must recognize by now that development and environmental protection must go hand-in-hand. It was just last summer that businesses came to a complete standstill because of toxic algae in Florida. We cannot put environmental protections to the side and call that progress.

Ultimately, laws like NEPA support local business and the development of infrastructure because it takes into consideration the concerns of local community and protects our precious natural resources. Thank you.

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