

Mr. Speaker, throughout the Capitol this week, we are being visited by men and women who are the leaders of our transit agencies around the country. I hope that as they are visiting with us today dealing with the things that make a difference to Americans, that we in Congress will be particularly aware of two pieces of legislation that they are seeking our assistance for that will make a difference for American families.

After all, notwithstanding a lot of what passes for topical political rhetoric in our Capitol, really what American families care about most is they want to be safe, they want their families economically secure, they want them healthy. I am here today to argue on behalf of two of these bills that will do that in terms of having a more balanced transportation system.

One, House Resolution 37, would give congressional employees here in the District of Columbia and in our district offices the opportunity to contribute to the livability of their communities by using transit. As local elected officials we have had the opportunity of implementing such programs in our community, and we found that transit passes made a great deal of difference. They improved morale of our employees, they decreased the demand for parking, they helped clean the air, they decreased congestion, and they actually ended up saving our employees money.

Sadly, the House of Representatives is behind the curve in offering transit benefits. Since 1984, private sector employers have offered their employees transit benefits for their commute to work. Even our colleagues in the U.S. Senate have successfully operated a transit pass program since 1992. Today over 2,000 employees of the Congressional Budget Office, the Architect of the Capitol, and the Senate participate in an employer-sponsored transit pass program. With the passage of the Federal Employees Clean Air Incentives Act of 1993, the House is authorized to offer its employees the same incentive.

Unfortunately, we have yet to do so. This is a bipartisan resolution, already with over 3 dozen cosponsors, that would give House offices the option to underwrite part of the cost of monthly passes for our employees. No additional revenue is needed to approve the program, since our employee transit passes would be funded out of existing transit office budgets.

The Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, WMATA, is extremely supportive of this legislation, and is ready to help the House implement the transit benefit program here in the D.C. metro area as soon as we are willing to work with them.

Additionally, we are hearing from our transit friends about another important piece of legislation. This is the Commuter Choice Act, H.R. 873, that is primarily sponsored by our colleague, the gentleman from Georgia [Mr. Lewis].

Most of us understand that the overwhelming reliance on single-occupant vehicles is responsible for unsafe air, unsafe streets, and gridlock that is increasingly paralyzing our communities. Yet, sadly, our tax policy encourages commuting by car over any other means of transportation. It is not enough that in America we spend more advertising the automobile than supporting transit. We have a tax system that discriminates against people who would like to do the right thing and not use their private automobile.

Employers can currently provide free parking up to \$170 a month tax-free, but a transit pass or car pool benefits are allowed for only one-third of that value. The Commuter Choice Act would eliminate this imbalance, and encourage energy savings without penalizing drivers.

It would increase the nontaxable transit pass benefit to the same \$170 per month as the tax-free parking benefit.

In addition, this bill will take away the disincentive for people who choose alternative transportation modes. Right now, if an employer decides that they are going to give \$25 a month as an incentive for people to walk, run, or bike to work, that will make the other benefits that they provide potentially taxable, including tax-free parking.

This bill would provide the opportunity for a stipend of \$15 to \$50 per month. This cash benefit would support employees who choose to walk, bike, run, rollerblade to work. We have had opportunities in the State of California, where this has been implemented by some employers.

I urge my colleagues to support these two bills.