

Testimony of the Honorable Jamie Azure

Tribal Chairman

Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians

March 15, 2017

United States Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

AUTOS Act

Boozhoo – Hello

Indizhnicaua Ogima Kitagasi Kinew – My name is Chief Spotted Eagle

Neen Mikinak Wajoooh Anishinabe Oshikoonigauun – I am from the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Tribe

Mino Giizhigan Noongom – It is a good day

Thank you distinguished members of the committee for the invitation and allowing me to speak on behalf of our Tribe and Tribes throughout our great nation for the proposed Addressing Underdeveloped and Tribally Operated Streets Act (AUTOS). The AUTOS Act is a step in the right direction to address some of the many needs of our Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) and Tribal road systems. I would like to thank Senator Hoeven and all that have been involved for their work on this legislation.

The AUTOS act will provide much needed additional funding the BIA Road Maintenance Program as well as addressing the deferred maintenance backlog of existing tribal roads. It will make road projects more efficient by improving the categorical exclusion process. By funding the Bridge Program separate from the Tribal Transportation Program, a higher portion of the TTP funds will be available to be redistributed to tribes. This legislation also addresses the Tribal Transportation Safety Needs by providing Tribes the opportunity to improve and access crash data available for analysis, study, and implementation.

The Purpose of the BIA Road Maintenance Program is to preserve, repair, and restore the BIA system of bridges and roadways and to ensure that Tribal Transportation Program – eligible highway structures are maintained. The Road Maintenance program is designed to address the road maintenance needs of roads owned by the BIA. Road Maintenance Program Activities include both, routine and emergency road maintenance, bridge maintenance, and snow and ice removal, among other things. Routine road maintenance activities may include but are not limited to surface pavement crack sealing and patching, surface grading, ditch slope and bottom maintenance, vegetation control, culvert cleanouts and replacements, sign maintenance and replacement, preparing winter materials, and other routine works. Road maintenance does not include new construction, improvement, or reconstruction.

BIA Roads are open to the public and are often major access corridors for tribal communities. The national BIA Road system consists of more than 930 BIA-owned bridges and approximately 29,000 miles of proposed and existing roads. Approximately 75 percent of the existing roads are not paved.

Our own roadway system also currently has 34.5 miles of concrete road that was constructed in 1976. Most of our road surfaces whether they are concrete, asphalt, or gravel are deteriorating and are extremely dangerous. Because we live in a climate that experiences extreme weather conditions and our tribal lands have a high-water table our roads are exposed to damaging freeze thaw cycles every year. These conditions make traveling our local BIA Roads even more dangerous in the spring season.

There are about 550,000 Native American students that are enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States, not counting Bureau of Indian Education schools. In addition, Bureau of Indian Education operates 185 schools serving about 41,000 students living on or near tribal lands.

Our own local school system is the greatest opportunity tribal members have to receive training and prepare themselves to make a meaningful contribution to society. It is of the utmost importance that the facilities that service our education system are up to health and safety standards. Improving and

maintaining our Tribal our tribal roadways aid in the path to education and prosperity by removing physical obstacles that make it difficult for tribal members to succeed. Our road system is heavily traveled by local school busses. Currently students from the Turtle Mountain Community College, the Turtle Mountain School System, the Ojibwa Indian School, the Dunseith Day School, The Dunseith Public School, the St. John Public School, the local Head Start Programs, and the Tiny Turtles Preschool are transported to and from school daily on our BIA and Tribal roadways.

Limited funding for tribal roads has been one of the challenges faced in improving and maintaining roads on tribal lands and has contributed to the deterioration of these roads. Current funding levels have led to less frequent maintenance and improvement activities. These conditions have forced most tribal maintenance activities to become more reactive to emergency situations than proactive and tribes are unable to carry out needed routine road maintenance.

Dangerous roadway conditions also impede the ability of our local first responders to perform their duties adequately. In many emergencies response time is crucial to saving lives. Current roadway conditions slow response times and further jeopardize the safety and well being of our community members.

Over the years Road Maintenance Program funding has remained relatively flat while the number of BIA roads eligible for these funds increased. Road Maintenance funding levels have not kept pace with the growing road maintenance requirements due to the addition of new roads, the need to address existing roads maintenance backlogs, and emergency operational requirements. The remoteness, tough environments, and unavailability of materials on tribal lands leads to comparatively higher costs for maintaining roads on tribal lands, which further exacerbate funding constraints. As roads fall deeper into disrepair through the delay of or inability to fund road maintenance activities, the more expensive the roads become to repair.

With a growing population and average daily traffic counts increasing throughout our own reservation, we have been required to do more work with the limited resources available to us. Our road maintenance equipment fleet is aging and most of the machinery require just as much time in the shop being repaired as they spend servicing our community out on our roadways. Our current Road Maintenance Department consists of 5 full time employees that service approximately 180 miles of roads. Although they are extremely dedicated and very skilled there is only so much that they can do. We, like most reservations, need and would welcome the increased funding and opportunities the AUTOS Act would provide so that we, in turn, would be able to provide safer transportation on our reservation.