February 20, 2012

Honorable Barbara Boxer
Chairman
Environment & Public Works Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Honorable James Inhofe
Ranking Member
Environment & Public Works Committee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Honorable Max Baucus
Chairman
Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Honorable David Vitter
Ranking Member
Transportation & Infrastructure Subcommittee
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC  20510

Dear Senators Boxer, Inhofe, Baucus, and Vitter:

We write in strong opposition to an amendment (Amdt. No. 1656) filed by Senator Toomey for consideration during floor debate of S. 1813, “MAP-21.” The amendment would eliminate a safety standard designed to ensure that traffic signs can be seen and understood in sufficient time to allow for safe nighttime driving. This national standard – developed after nearly two decades of research, public comment, and scientific review – will make nighttime driving safer for all motorists but particularly for the fast growing population of drivers 65 and older who need more light to see and respond timely to the important warnings, guidance, and directional information that traffic signs provide. Eliminating the retroreflectivity standard would undermine the advances in roadway safety that the nation has achieved in recent years; thus, we urge you to oppose the Toomey amendment.

The safety problem at issue here is as straightforward as it is serious. Although only 25 percent of travel occurs at night, more than half of traffic fatalities occur during nighttime hours. Based on years of human factors research, the Federal Highway Administration concluded that “providing retroreflective delineation and signing is important as a means of reducing the higher nighttime crash rates.” We agree.

As mentioned above, the retroreflectivity standard also addresses a need that is particularly prevalent among older drivers. The amount of light needed by drivers doubles every 13 years, starting at approximately age 20. Thus, a 72-year-old needs 16 times the amount of light required by a 20-year-old to drive safely. That’s important because an overwhelming majority of the older population currently meets its mobility needs through use of the private automobile, and people age 65 and older are our fastest growing group of drivers.

Some may argue that state and local governments should decide for themselves what level of sign retroreflectivity is sufficient or acceptable in their own jurisdiction. The fact is, however, that millions of Americans drive each year beyond the borders of their own states and localities, and ensuring that traffic signs across the country provide at least the bare minimum of retroreflectivity needed for safe
nighttime driving will make travel safer and improve the quality of life for everyone whose mobility depends on the use of a private vehicle.

Thank you for considering our views on this important highway safety issue. We hope the full Senate will choose to preserve this research-based retroreflectivity standard in the interests of millions of motorists who travel nearly three trillion miles in the U.S. each year.

Sincerely,

AAA
AARP
Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety
American Highway Users Alliance
American Society of Civil Engineers
American Traffic Safety Services Association
Commercial Vehicle Safety Alliance
National Association of Area Agencies on Aging
Nationwide Mutual Insurance Company
Transportation for America

cc: U.S. Senators