

**Testimony of Dr. Steven Cliff**  
**Nominee to be Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**  
**Before the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation**  
**December 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021**

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today as the nominee for Administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

I want to thank the President and Secretary Buttigieg for their trust in nominating me. I also want to thank my wife, Maureen, and our two adult children, Evelyn and Grayson, my folks and all the rest of my family and friends who are watching online.

I have spent my entire career as a public servant. First, as a scientist at the University of California, Davis, and then for more than a decade in various technical and leadership roles in the California government, where I championed sustainable transportation. Now, if I'm honored enough to be confirmed, I will draw upon those decades of experience to help make our transportation system safer for every American.

NHTSA's mission of saving lives on our nation's roads is very personal for me, just as it is for too many Americans. While in high school, I rode in a caravan with a group of friends heading to a graduation gathering at the beach. One of the cars, driven by my best friend, bumped another car when changing lanes, crossed the median, flipped over, and collided with an oncoming car. Oleanders were the only median barriers at that time to protect against oncoming traffic. Three of the four occupants, including my best friend, were killed. My life was changed forever.

This tragedy led parents in my hometown to start a graduation night event to reduce tragedies like this. And while neither alcohol nor drugs played a role in the event I just described, these safe and sober graduation night parties have undoubtedly prevented many senseless deaths in the 33 years since that terrible day.

Since February 2, 2021, I have served as the Deputy Administrator for NHTSA, working with some of the most dedicated and professional public servants I've ever encountered. NHTSA is focused on making our vehicles safer for everyone while integrating policies that make transportation more safe, equitable and environmentally sustainable - top priorities of this Administration.

Like the rest of the Department, I am gravely concerned about the increase in traffic fatalities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secretary Buttigieg rightfully called it a crisis. While many stopped driving in the early days of the pandemic, those who remained on the road were more likely to engage in risky behaviors. As a result, we've seen an unprecedented rise in roadway fatalities. I am committed to turning this around.

We have much to learn about why some driving behaviors changed during the pandemic, how we can encourage people to make safer choices, and how to change a culture that accepts the loss of tens of thousands of people in roadway crashes as inevitable. We continue to work with safety

stakeholders around the country to develop countermeasures but more work needs to be done. A cultural change will take a transformational and collaborative approach to safety. Everyone – including those who design, operate, build and use the road system – shares responsibility for road safety. By taking a safe systems approach, we commit to improving safety for all road users. A safe system approach incorporates the 5 Es: equity, engineering, education, enforcement, and emergency medical services.

The monumental Bipartisan Infrastructure Law will be central to these efforts. This historic legislation increases NHTSA's budget by 50% - the largest investment in motor vehicle and highway safety since NHTSA was established more than 50 years ago. This funding will improve our understanding of where and how crashes happen by improving data quality and expanding electronic reporting to move from paper-based data collection systems to digital systems. It will also broaden the Crash Investigation Sampling System by increasing the number of data collection sites, including more crash types, and adding on-scene investigation protocols to enhance data collection in crashes involving Vulnerable Road Users. These improvements will allow us to understand in real time the causes of crashes and help us address those causes.

NHTSA is also responsible for setting the Corporate Average Fuel Economy Standards. I am committed to making the transportation fleet as efficient as possible, to save consumers billions of dollars at the pump, to improve the nation's energy security and to protect the environment. We will focus on safe, equitable, and environmentally protective policies as we carry out our life saving mission.

If I have the honor of being confirmed as the Administrator of NHTSA, I commit to continuing to work with members of this Committee to improve roadway safety, foster innovation, advance transportation equity, and address climate change.

Chair Cantwell, Ranking Member Wicker, and Members of the Committee, thank you for your consideration. I look forward to your questions.