

U.S. Transportation Secretary Buttigieg talks 'complete streets' during UI visit

By LUKE TAYLOR ltaylor@news-gazette.com

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On the air

Pete Buttigieg, Nikki Budzinski and Dick Durbin also made a Monday stop in Savoy to trumpet the \$22.6 million in federal funding for the Curtis Road underpass project. Hear how it went at 9 a.m. today, when Savoy Village President John Brown joins Brian Barnhart on 'Penny.'

URBANA — U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg didn't pass up the chance to endear himself to the Midwesterners in the room during Monday's visit to the University of Illinois campus while talking about the future of transportation.

"I can be a little parochial here as a product of the Midwest — it's uniquely situated as a literal and figurative crossroads of America," said the former South Bend, Ind., mayor and 2020 Democratic presidential hopeful. "It features every mode of transportation in a major sense, and I would add has the advantage of having all four seasons."

Buttigieg talked about the effect of changing weather conditions on buildings and infrastructure, using that to connect with the local politicians in the room, too.

"You are on the front lines of the war against potholes," Buttigieg said.

Buttigieg made a stop in the Newmark Civil Engineering Building on Monday for a "fireside chat" alongside U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski, D-Springfield, and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill.

They also spoke in Savoy, where they officially announced \$22.6 million in federal funds for a project to eliminate the railroad crossing at Curtis Road and U.S. 45, and in East St. Louis on the same day.

There were over 150 people in the room for the campus talk, but with a strict schedule for the day, questions for Buttigieg and the others primarily came from Grainger College of Engineering Dean Rashid Bashir and a few audience members.



U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg answers a question as Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., listens during a visit Monday to the Grainger College of Engineering on the University of Illinois campus in Urbana. Luke Taylor/The News-Gazette



Students from the UI Rail Transportation and Engineering Center came to the Newmark Civil Engineering Building to listen to a conversation with Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, U.S. Rep. Nikki Budzinski and U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin on Monday. Luke Taylor/The News-Gazette

In looking toward the future, Buttigieg put forth the idea of “complete streets.”

“Now is a great opportunity not to repeat some of the mistakes that we’ve inherited,” Buttigieg said. “There was a period that we thought, for example, that the only function of a road going through the middle of a built-up area where a lot of people live is to blast vehicles through as quickly as possible.”

A “complete street,” according to Buttigieg, would include sidewalks and more space so that cars, bicycles and pedestrians, including wheelchair users, can “coexist peacefully.”

He said that while this may seem like a new idea to some, he sees it as going back to basics, approaching city planning more like someone would have before the invention of cars.

“We were so excited about what cars could bring that we neglected to fit that into a bigger picture,” Buttigieg said.

This development would also include reliable public transportation so that people would want to use it whether they personally owned a car or not.

That would mean improving railways too, both for passengers and freight.

“On the freight side, we need to deal with a couple things. One is an industry structure that has become more and more concentrated,” Buttigieg said. “Usually, highly concentrated oligopolistic industries are not the most conducive.”

The omnipresent subject of the COVID-19 pandemic was another big topic of conversation.

Buttigieg noted that the pandemic exposed “brittleness” in the supply chain and how climate change could continue to create new challenges, but spoke about changes already made to solve some of the problems that came up.

To close out the conversation, Bashir asked if Buttigieg had any advice on career paths for students in the engineering college, some of whom were in attendance.

Buttigieg, of course, recommended public service.

“If you save five lives on a hilltop in a war zone, you’ll rightly get a medal,” he said. “You can save dozens of lives at a risky intersection with better design. There might not be a medal for that, but there’s an enormous reward in knowing the difference.”

Luke Taylor