

THE ECONOMIC CLUB

O F W A S H I N G T O N, D. C.

Virtual Signature Event

The Honorable Pete Buttigieg
U.S. Secretary of Transportation

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President
The Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

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ANNOUNCER: Please welcome David Rubenstein, chairman of The Economic Club of Washington, D.C.

DAVID M. RUBENSTEIN: Welcome, everyone. We're going to have a conversation with the secretary of transportation this morning. Mr. Secretary, thank you very much for being with us.

SECRETARY PETE BUTTIGIEG: Thank you. It's an honor to be with you.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, as I think everybody knows, the secretary was the mayor of South Bend, Indiana. And he previously was a graduate of Harvard, a Rhodes scholar, a member of the U.S. Naval Reserve, and somebody who deployed to Afghanistan, and was a candidate for president the last time around, the Democratic primaries, and actually won the Iowa caucuses, and now is serving as our 19th secretary of transportation.

So, Mr. Secretary, do you have any comment on the Bezos space flight today? Do you wish you had been in that capsule? And do you have any desire to ever go up in one of those capsules?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: I would go up in a heartbeat. I think it's such exciting stuff. I don't think the airfare or spacefare, or whatever you would call it, is going to be in my budget anytime soon, but, you know, certainly watching them and some of the others with great interest. And excited to see it. And then on the official side, we have an Office of Commercial Space Travel, mostly dealing with the part where they go through the national airspace, and doing everything we can to keep the public, folks on the ground, safe.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, Mr. Secretary, if you wanted to go up, I think they would waive the fee, but that's a separate issue.

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: [Laughs.]

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So I'm just curious, though, do you think more and more Americans will be engaged in this kind of space travel? And is this a problem for you and other government officials to kind of monitor this and make sure it's safe for everybody? Or this is something you're not that worried about?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: I think there will be a lot more where this came from. And it's – I don't think of it as a problem, but it certainly presents some challenges. We've got to make sure that as we see an increasing amount of launch activity that, first of all, our national airspace is safe. We've got a lot of aircraft who – obviously, it's very important to make sure, just as we do every day, to make sure they don't cross paths with each other in the wrong way. You know, this adds another factor. Same thing on the ground.

Now, this is really in its infancy. So there's been a largely hands-off approach. You pretty much fly at your own risk. And that's – I think everybody understands it'll be a while before we're at the level of commercial airline travel, where you should have a 100 percent expectation of safety on board. But whatever risks those early travelers decided they're going to

take on, we got to make sure that there is no risk to people on the ground, to people in the airspace. And that is going to require us to prepare for a future where there is more and more of this activity. Very exciting, but one of many things across the 2020s that we're going to need to grow into, because we just weren't designed for a lot of private space travel going up.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So let's deal with the Earth today and deal with something a little more challenging right now than probably going into space, which is getting an infrastructure bill out of the Senate and out of the Congress. So as you know, there's a so-called bipartisan agreement that is being worked on. What is your confidence level that there will be a bipartisan bill that the president can support?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, you know, very confident in the terms of the agreement that the president shook hands on with Republican and Democratic senators and announced at the White House. And what we've seen is the American people are very impatient for this to happen. Now, of course, we have learned that just because something has widespread, broad-based, bipartisan support around the country doesn't automatically mean that that can command the support that it needs in the U.S. Congress.

And that's exactly what is being worked through right now. But I think the terms of the deal are sound. I think the interest in doing these things – from the investments in roads and bridges to making sure that we deal with lead pipes and get everybody broadband internet infrastructure, these are things that, again, you don't have to be a member of one party to believe in or to do. And continue to have high hopes that we can get this to the president's desk for signature.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Well, let's talk about two issues related to that. How much time would the president and the administration wait before saying: We just can't wait any longer on a bipartisan bill and we might just go through budget reconciliation to deal with this? Is there a deadline that you or the president have to get this bipartisan bill through the Congress?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, a lot of that comes down to the mechanics of the House and the Senate. And we leave it to them to play their constitutional role. But there's obviously a lot of eagerness to get this done. It can only remain infrastructure week for so many weeks. And that's why we're anticipating the votes that'll happen in the next really hours, in the next day or two. And watching that with great interest, and deeply involved to try to make sure that the policy stays on the right track.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So I'm sure you're familiar with the now-common Washington term of pay-fors. And the theory is you have to pay for things. And so in the infrastructure bill being talked about now, it's not clear what the pay-fors are. Do you have any views on whether there have to be pay-fors? Does the infrastructure bill – bipartisan infrastructure bill have to be 100 percent paid for or can it be debt financed?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, when the president put forward his original vision, the American Jobs Plan, it was fully paid for, and fully paid for a way that also kept his promise not to raise taxes for anyone making less than \$400,000 a year. So that's our position as the administration. But

also have been open to different approaches that will be put forward by the Congress. I think that, you know, infrastructure historically is an example of the kind of government investment that actually pays for itself.

That has been – that claim has been made about a lot of things, sometimes true, sometimes not. But one area where it’s certainly true is good infrastructure investment. We’ll see where things come down. We certainly believe in the IRS provisions, the closing of loopholes, other ways to make sure that the funding is there. But again, the only red line the president’s drawn on the subject of funding is that it not touch ordinary Americans who he thinks are already paying more than enough.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. So as you know, Congress has largely eliminated earmarks. So when you have infrastructure bills traditionally, the infrastructure to which it was going to be spent was largely agreed to in advance. Now, without earmarks, it’s really up to the Department of, let’s say, Transportation or other departments to figure out where the money’s going to go. So if this bill does go through, is it your decision about which bridges, which toll roads, which other airports get built or not?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: We’re going to see a couple of things happening at once. Part of this will support formula funds that are set forth in a congressional framework that’s very predictable and that’s distributed in a way that doesn’t involve a lot of discretion. Other elements could support things like our RAISE¹ program, formerly known as BUILD or TIGER, and new programs that we may have to stand up in order to efficiently get those dollars out where discretion is going to come into play.

But I’d also point to the universal character of a lot of the elements of this framework. So when we talk about something like making sure that literally 100 percent of Americans have accessible, affordable internet, or eliminating 100 percent of the lead service lines and pipes in our country, part of the virtue and the value of that is no one has to wonder, no member of Congress has to wonder, is my district in on this? No citizen has to say, am I going to be one of the ones who benefits from this? Because we’re saying our policy in this framework would be to take care of everyone in the country.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So let’s talk about parochial issues. What about the Metro in Washington, which seems to have some needs for more capital? Would this infrastructure bill – if it passed, would there be any money for Metro and any money for fixing potholes in the Washington area, which I notice from time to time we have?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, every mayor or former mayor is a natural sworn enemy of the American pothole. And so it’s safe to say that I’ll be very eager to see this investment – which,

¹ The Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity, or RAISE Discretionary Grant program, provides a unique opportunity for the DOT to invest in road, rail, transit and port projects that promise to achieve national objectives. Previously known as the Better Utilizing Investments to Leverage Development (BUILD) and Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) Discretionary Grants, Congress has dedicated nearly \$8.9 billion for twelve rounds of National Infrastructure Investments to fund projects that have a significant local or regional impact. (<https://www.transportation.gov/RAISEgrants/about>)

again represents the largest we've done since the days of Eisenhower on things like roads and bridges – help communities that are keeping their roads in good shape. On the Metro front, as a long-time Metro rider it's very important for me, for our federal workforce, not to mention for the community in and around Washington to have WMATA² be successful. It has \$150 million line item just in terms of direct support in the budget.

And I do believe that in the bipartisan framework there will be more for agencies like this to work with, because we're talking about the largest single federal investment proposed, \$49 billion overall for public transit. That's the most we've ever done as a federal government. And it's precisely in the knowledge that there are transit agencies that have been through a lot. We did a lot in the rescue plan to keep them back from the brink, but really could be taking things to the next level.

And one last point on transit, you know, it may look like a transit title and not a climate title if you're looking at the text of the bill, but let's be clear that part of – [inaudible, technical difficulties] – confronting things like climate change is making decisions to support public transit.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: There hasn't been a major new airport built in this country for almost 25 years. I think the last major one was the Denver airport. Do you anticipate this bill, if the bipartisan infrastructure bill goes through, that we can actually start building or really modernizing airports?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Our airports should lead the world. And I think if you've had the experience of traveling abroad you know that we cannot say with a straight face that the overall picture of American airports is the envy of the world. We ought to be. And that's one of the reasons there are \$25 billion in this framework to improve our airports. And I saw one ranking of U.S. airports where not one of the top – or world airports – sorry – where not one of the top 25 was in the U.S. We think they should be.

And of course, it's not just the big, gleaming, global hubs. But it's making sure that smaller communities, like where I come from, are well-served by what they need in terms of air mobility to connect to that national and global economy. So, yes, that's absolutely part of this framework, and actually one of the parts that I found was easiest from a bipartisan perspective to get support on.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So broadband has been something that the administration has talked a great deal about. And I'm just curious, if this bill passes, will everybody in the United States have access to broadband at some affordable price, in your view? And will my cellphone calls not get dropped all the time when I'm, you know, running around Washington, D.C.? I don't know if you've ever had that experience, but there are a couple places in Washington where the cellphones don't work so well. So are you going to fix all that with this bill?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Washington architecture seems to have a unique capacity to scramble cellphone signals. I don't have the technical expertise to weigh in on that. But the answer to the

² Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

first part of your question is absolutely yes. This is a vision to get everybody broadband. It has to be fast and it has to be affordable. And that's partly a function of having the right fiber and the right resources out there. But it's also policies to encourage competition and keep prices manageable, all of which is part of what the president's put forward.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So since people have been flying again, it's clear that there's some passengers that either don't want to wear a mask when they're supposed to, or want to invade the cabin, or want to jump out of the airplane, or whatever. Is there some reason why this is going on more than we saw before? And I thought there were U.S. air marshals on lots of flights, but when these things happen it seems like the regular passengers are the ones that are subduing the people. Where are the air marshals?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, they're there. And at the same time, there's no question that what we're seeing now is not just the kinds of routine – not routine – but familiar threats that the federal air marshal program was set up to handle, but also a pattern of just utterly unacceptable behavior from passengers. And I want to be very clear that the FAA has no tolerance for this and that we have the backs of flight crews who are doing their jobs. We have issued fines in the tens of thousands of dollars. Police are able to pursue jail time against disruptive passengers. And there's just no acceptable reason for this. How it's coming about? I think part of this, unfortunately, is a politicization of public health measures. But again, there should be nothing political about the idea that you respect flight crews who are there to keep you safe.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, cruise ships are beginning to take large numbers of passengers again on these cruise ships. Are you comfortable that this is safe? And the Delta variant, is that a problem that you're worried about with respect to cruise ships or things like that?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, it's a problem for everything. It's something that we're very closely watching in the interagency taskforce and across our different departments. But I do have a lot of confidence in the framework that the CDC put forward to assure safe operations of cruise ships. And we've seen the cruise industry step forward talking about the measures they're ready to take to make sure that their crews and their passengers are safe. And I hope that they can expect support across different levels of government and across the aisle for doing so. There are so many – it's not just the direct employees of the cruise industry, but it's communities from Florida to Alaska that count on the economic lift that comes from those cruises. They have to be safe, but there are ways to see to that. And we want that sector to thrive.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now let's talk about micro-mobility, which is things like bicycles or other kinds of things. You're a big bicycle rider. How have you found bike riding in the Washington, D.C. area?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: I think it's great. I love the – everything from the protected bike lanes right up Pennsylvania Avenue, that can take you from Capitol Hill to the White House, to an excellent network of trails. You know, the bottom line, as with everything else we do, is safety. We've got to make sure that it is safe and easy to commute by bicycle, so that when we're encouraging people to do it we're asking them to do something that they're comfortable with. It may not be for everybody, but I've been doing it more and more. And I think that it's a great alternative to

get around. Sometimes, as you know, in downtown Washington it's actually legitimately quicker than any other type of transportation. And it has benefits from a congestion, health, and climate perspective too. We want to support communities, big and small, that are trying to make their bike infrastructure more user-friendly and more modern.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And what about electric cars? Is the government, the administration, going to be buying more electric vehicles for its fleets of trucks and mini-trucks and automobiles? Or is it just too expensive, you don't have the resources to do that?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: We are moving in that direction. The president has challenged us all to do that. We're looking at that as a department team, though we don't have – relatively speaking to some of the others – we don't have that many vehicles owned and operated by the DOT. But where we do, we're looking at that. The Postal Service obviously is a huge opportunity to move in this direction. And while there are upfront costs, there are also major long-term savings – same as there are for a family – when you're not paying that gas bill.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So climate change has been a big effort by the president and by you to kind of reduce the effects of the climate change. But transportation does cause a fair amount of carbon in the atmosphere. What do you think the most important thing an American can do to reduce his or her carbon footprint in the transportation area? And what are you doing to help reduce the Transportation Department's carbon footprint?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, again, part of this is through electrification. We're also looking at things like buildings, everything we do. But here's the bottom line: Transportation is the single biggest sector contributing greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Which, to me, means we get to be the biggest sector contributing solutions, if we do this right. And while there are lots of things that we encourage Americans to do, the reality is it shouldn't be up to an individual consumer to solve these problems. We need policies that move us in the right direction.

That's why, for example, we're trying to make adopting an electric vehicle – which many Americans would be ready to do tomorrow provided it was affordable and that they knew they could get to where they needed to be. We're trying to make it easier and more affordable, building a network of half a million charging stations so you never have to wonder about range and measures to make sure that it pencils out.

And one thing I want to emphasize on the electric vehicle front is that actually a lot of the biggest gains, the biggest benefits could be in the areas that today we least associate with electric vehicles psychologically, which is rural areas where people drive more, which means they burn more gas, which means they'd save more money. And they're more likely to have applications like a pickup truck towing, which the superior torque in an electric vehicle is a big benefit to. So when we're talking about that, the work we're doing on the aviation side, making sure our ports are operating with more electric equipment or anything else, we view transportation as a huge source, both domestically and helping to lead the world, to tackle the climate challenge.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: What about autonomous driving cars? Do you have a view that that's in our future in the short term? Or do you think that's a 10-year or more project down the road?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: You know, I saw some on the road just the other day in Phoenix. So the technology is here. The policy has not caught up to the technology, and the technology is still being refined. But this is something that we are going to be seeing more and more of. It holds great promise from a safety perspective. You know, human drivers don't have a great track record in terms of safety. And it holds great promise in terms of accessibility for elderly and disabled drivers, for example, or commuters who would have more options. But there are also challenges in terms of congestion, making sure the safety really is robust, dealing with some of the labor impacts that this represents.

And the reality is right now we have a framework where states regulate the driver, if you think about where you go to get your driver's license, and the federal government regulates the car, if you think about what we do with NHTSA³, the five-star safety ratings, recalls, and so on. So it's not – we're not really set up structurally for scenarios where the car is the driver. And that's where policy has to catch up.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Does the – does your department regulate drones? It seems as if anybody can buy a drone these days and fly it almost anywhere they want. Is there any regulatory policy to kind of limit where drones can fly, or how big they can be, or who can use them?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: There is. And this is another area that's evolving with the FAA. If you think about the biggest periods of change for the FAA, I think, in the next decade, one thing we're going to see is what we talked about at the top of this conversation, the highest-flying space vehicles. And the other is things that are quite close to the ground. Again, anything that's in the national airspace is of concern to our department and the FAA. And a lot of this is going to have to do with size, the complexity of these. They present, again, great promise in terms of connecting rural and tribal communities – delivery, congestion mitigation, commercial possibility – but also a lot of security, technological, safety, collision, and privacy concerns that we got to deal with.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, in Sweden there is a program called Vision Zero, which basically is designed to eliminate automobile fatalities. It seems to be making some progress. Is there anything like that we can do in the United States? And are you working on something like that?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: There is. And we need to do more in this regard. Safety I think is the basic reason my department exists. And yet, when it comes to vehicle fatalities, we kind of have come to accept it. Everyone watching this broadcast can think of people that we know who we lost in crashes. And like a society at war, we've come to think of that as something that's just sort of natural. To me, it's no more permanent or natural than the situation of people of a certain social class in 18th century England who would occasionally lose a friend in a duel. We need to make this an outdated way for people to lose their lives. And that means the idea that only zero is an acceptable number of fatalities. By the way, the U.S., in numbers that almost remind us of patterns of gun violence, the U.S. has shockingly worse rates of pedestrian and traffic fatalities than many other developed countries.

³ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, under President Eisenhower we set up the interstate highway system and it was paid for by a gasoline tax, but it hasn't been increased in quite a while. Does the administration have a view on whether that is the appropriate way to keep paying for the highway system, which is to say increasing the tax, or your position is to hold the tax at where it is?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: The president's plans show that we don't have to go there in order to fund even enormously ambitious infrastructure investments. And even if it were raised it wouldn't be nearly enough, which is one of the reasons why we looked in a different direction, finding that there are so many places to establish an environment that would still have lower tax rates than most of my lifetime but establish the revenue that's needed. So the president views this as part of how he keeps his promise not to raise taxes on anyone making less than \$400,000 a year.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So let's talk about Washington, D.C. You lived in South Bend for much of your life. You now live in Washington, D.C., and you're dealing with a gigantic department. How have you found adjusting to life in Washington and running a gigantic bureaucracy, as some people would call it? Is it fun, or not as much fun as you thought?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: It's great fun. And you know, Washington, I think, is much more of a city, a great city, as a city than it gets credit for. My only other stint here of any length was a few months shortly after college, and I've seen so much happen in terms of growth and development, a lot of challenges, and just a lot of beauty in the neighborhoods and community energy of this city.

It's certainly a different animal, an agency of 55,000-some employees, where I find that I spend more time sometimes maneuvering within my own agency than I did as a mayor, where I took a comparatively small bureaucracy and was maneuvering it to get things done. But it's also an agency full of really committed, interesting, and passionate people who are so good at what they do that getting to know the career staff that we have has been one of the great pleasures of this work. And while Washington has its ups and downs in terms of its cultural style being a company town, I found that both from a community perspective and a department perspective it's been a great place to be.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So what has been the biggest surprise to you of being a Cabinet secretary and dealing with the government in Washington? Is the government less functional than you might have thought before or is it about what you thought before?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: You know, I would say this. The org chart of the executive branch is not really organized in the way that our lives are.

So think about transportation, for example, inseparable from energy, especially as we go into EVs⁴. Inseparable from housing in a – you know, in a family's budget. If you look at transportation, housing, and your other bills, they all come due at the same time. But we're a little bit siloed in terms of the way the administration is structured.

⁴ Electric vehicles

Having said that, one thing I really am proud of in being part of this team in the Biden-Harris administration is how we work across those siloes. A Cabinet that – we’ll be actually convening today in our second Cabinet meeting, but where we’re in some way or another talking across those lines literally every day and inviting our staffs to do the same – which is helping us, I think, to solve those problems.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Have you been surprised at generally the lack of bipartisanship in Washington, D.C., compared to what you might have thought or compared to what you were used to in Indiana or South Bend, or –

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Yeah, I did get accustomed as mayor to working across those party lines. And it wasn’t about pretending to or trying to abandon our partisan or ideological beliefs or commitments; it was about mapping common ground and getting something done.

It is remarkable how something can have widespread support among Republicans and Democrats around America in places like where I come from and still not be able to command the support that it needs to get through on Capitol Hill. But if there’s any area where we can change that trend, I think of all the areas in domestic policy where we could do it, it’s transportation. And we have a chance to do it right now and hopefully build off of that.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, during COVID, when you were running the department, were you running it by virtual means, or how were you dealing with COVID in terms of running the department?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Yeah. Early on – it was a while before I came into the office. There was a moment where it was wearing on us a little in our one-bedroom apartment and Chasten posed the – my husband posed the question to me as I sat at the little workstation that I was running the department from: Am I sleeping in the office or are you working in the bedroom? And I know a lot of families have gone through that.

We’ve been on maximum telework for a while now. We’re moving into the phase of really looking at the future of work and what it’s going to represent. And while I’m eager for more opportunities to be in a room with my colleagues, I also think we need to recognize that we cannot and should not try to just rewind back to 2019. We have a responsibility and an opportunity to come up – as so many organizations are thinking through right now, to come up with ways of working that bring us together when we need to be but don’t lose the flexibilities that meant so much to so many people, even if they were imposed on us by a terrible situation. It could be a learning opportunity that leapfrogs us a generation in terms of what it’s like to work in America, and we’re trying to model that as a department.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So each year, 32 Americans are selected – college students – to be a Rhodes scholar. You were one of those 32 when you were graduating. What did you do to get a Rhodes scholarship? Were you good in the interviews? What did you do at Harvard that you think made you stand out?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: I guess in some ways it's not for me to say. But you know, it was an incredible experience. Everyone who I remember interviewing for that, even though we were all competitors in the room where they had us stewing, waiting for the news to come in, became friends as well. And it was a transformative experience. Winning that scholarship really changed my life in many ways, and I always think about my good fortune and the community that we built there. And one really exciting thing has been the chance to reconnect with people from that community, coming back to Washington.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So you decided to not pursue the important area of private equity or investment banking or things that are really important to our country. You decided to go into public service. Did you ever have any regrets about something like that?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: [Laughs.] You know, I love public service. I had a brief stint in consulting. I learned a lot there and I enjoyed that, but I figured out pretty quickly that in the long run, as a – as a permanent career it wasn't quite for me. But you know, the great thing about public service is the stimulation you get from seeing how the things you do will make a difference and the pressure that you get making sure that that difference is a good one.

I don't think I would have guessed that my path would have taken me home to Indiana to be in local government, and I certainly wouldn't have – wouldn't have guessed when I made that choice that it would lead to me being out here about a decade later. But it's been incredibly rewarding helping to shape my community and now helping to play a role in guiding our country forward in this administration.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: When you were elected mayor of South Bend, at one point you decided to go to – as a member of the U.S. Naval Reserve to go to Afghanistan, volunteer to go to Afghanistan, where your life was, you know, at risk. What did your mother say when you told her you were going to go to Afghanistan?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, as you might imagine, there was some apprehension when I got my orders. And at the same time, she was from a military family and I think understood the call to service, and the community supported me wonderfully as I went through that process.

I do remember a moment when I was checking out at the sort of Reserve center as I was transitioning to active duty where I had to interview with the command master chief, making sure that my affairs were squared away. And he asked if I had a supporting employer and I said that I did. And he asked what I did, and I told him I worked for the city. And he said, oh, well, when you come back, if they continue to be a supportive employer, make sure that you put them in for a reward for supporting members of the Reserve and the Guard because sometimes an elected official will come and they just eat that stuff up. And I remember trying to decide – [laughs] – whether to explain myself a little more or just take the advice and run, but it was a really – obviously, an experience that really shaped me and one I think about a lot, especially now as that longest war is coming to an end.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So you ran for president in the Democratic primaries in the last presidential election and you did very well in the beginning. You won the Iowa caucuses and –

but you were so young compared to some of the others. Any regrets about running at such a young age? And what did you learn out of the experience that you think has helped you become a better secretary of transportation than you would have otherwise been?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, the great thing that you learn from that experience is you can see so much of the country all at once. When you're a mayor, you see just about every issue that can touch a community. But when you run for president, you see just about every community that can be affected by an issue. And what I remember most are the stories of the people that I encountered.

I'm proud of our campaign. I'm glad we did it. It also feels like things have worked out in a great way for the country with a terrific administration that I'm honored to be part of. I'd like to think I am better at this job because of everything that I learned, including some lessons learned the hard way from a hard-fought and great campaign experience.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So, as secretary, you've got a lot of responsibilities. What do you do for relaxation? Do you just do bike riding, or you, you know, walk? Or what do you do to kind of relax?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Yeah. I'm training for a triathlon, so that's giving me a good excuse to get out and about in D.C. more. I love taking my bike out on the great trails that are here. I'm running a lot. I've even found that there's open-water swimming going on in the – in the Potomac and I've gotten into that a little bit. So it's prompted me to see things I wouldn't otherwise in the city and helps loosen me up for all the time in front of a screen or on the road.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: You see in Washington and other cities people going around on electric scooters. I don't know if you've ever done one of those, but do you think that's a good thing for the climate change problem or it's a dangerous thing? Because you can fall off those things and get hurt.

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, you got to be careful. And yeah, I have been on – in fact, the first time I ever experienced one was here in Washington. And you know, all of these forms of micro mobility – scooters, e-bikes, and whatever's around the corner – can play a great role, I think, in helping people move around safely, dealing with congestion, and can be positive climate-wise too.

But it has to be safe, and only part of that can be put on the individual user. A lot of that's a question of policy. And look, our sidewalks and streets used to be designed for two things: being on foot – that's the sidewalk; and being in a car – that's the road. And now we've gotten a little bit smarter about that and mixed it up so it's about the sidewalks for the bike – or, for the pedestrian and the wheelchair, the bike lane for the bike, and then the road for everything else. But when you add scooters and electrified bikes and even these hoverboard-type things to the mix, we can't have a lane for each of those. So we need to think in a smart way about how to accommodate peacefully all of these coexisting or competing ways of getting around.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Now, if you're competing in a triathlon and you're the secretary of transportation, do they give you a head start or some advantage to make sure you do well?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: [Laughs.] I very much doubt it. We'll see how I do.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: So back to the infrastructure bill. If there is no bipartisan infrastructure bill, is it the administration's position that everything can just be put into a so-called budget reconciliation bill and therefore put the hard infrastructure part into the soft infrastructure part? Or is it not something you're really prepared to say yet about whether you – if there's no bipartisan bill, you would put everything in budget reconciliation?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, that's not our preference. We want both of these things to pass. The president hopes to sign both of them. And I still think that's, as of this conversation, where things stand. There will be some twists and turns, but what we know is that there are so many things in the president's economic agenda that Americans want us to do.

And by the way, for my dime, the things in the so-called partisan bill also deserve Republican votes. I don't think you have to be a Democrat to believe in extending the child tax credit or getting us paid family leave like people in every other developed country can enjoy.

But anyway, there are some things that, obviously, won't attract a lot of Republican support, but there are some things that we can do together. And for the things that we can't do together, let's at least try.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK. Now, the air traffic control system in our country is a little bit antiquated compared to Europe. Is there anything in the infrastructure bill that might pass that will modernize it, or you think it's not likely anything can change in the near future?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Well, there's enormous effort underway in what's called NextGen, as in next-generation air traffic control, but it's not like a software upgrade that you just go from 3.0 to 4.0 and it's done. Many of these changes have already happened. Many more still need to happen, and that's underway.

I think passing this framework would certainly help by bringing more dollars into our airports and into our transportation network more broadly. But it's also in our regular budget and something we'll be working on, I'm sure, for as long as I have this job.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Mr. Secretary, we have time for one more question. My question is: What is the main message you would like to give to Americans about what the Department of Transportation is doing under your leadership that is maybe different than your predecessors did or something that you hope other people would know about the department that they might not already know?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: I guess what I want people to know is that we have a historic moment on our hands. The 2020s could be remembered as one of the most transformative periods in American transportation ever. And that we should be expecting more when it comes to safety,

when it comes to equity, when it comes to climate, when it comes to good job creation, all of which is possible through making the right choices on transportation.

It's why we're thrilled with the possibility of this bipartisan infrastructure framework. And should that pass, we will immediately get to work on deploying those resources so that Americans feel the difference and feel our democracy working to make their lives better.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: Mr. Secretary – by the way, do people call you Secretary Pete or do you prefer Secretary – what do you prefer? You used to be called Mayor Pete. What do people call you now?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Yeah, I still get a lot of Mayor Pete, which I take as a compliment. Secretary Pete's fine by me, too. And you know, I'm very happy to be here, so people can call me what they may.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: And do people mispronounce your last name ever anymore, or they get it right now?

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: You know, it's actually happening less and less, which I take to be a small miracle.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: OK.

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: But, yeah, I think some people stick with "Pete" for that reason.

MR. RUBENSTEIN: All right. Secretary Pete, thank you very much for your time with us today. Appreciate it very much.

SEC. BUTTIGIEG: Thank you. It was a pleasure. Thank you.



The Honorable Pete Buttigieg U.S. Secretary of Transportation

Pete Buttigieg currently serves as the 19th Secretary of Transportation, having been sworn in on February 3, 2021.

Prior to joining the Biden-Harris Administration, Secretary Buttigieg served two terms as mayor of his hometown of South Bend, Indiana. A graduate of Harvard University and a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, Buttigieg served for seven years as an officer in the U.S. Navy Reserve, taking a leave of absence from the mayor's office for a deployment to Afghanistan in 2014.

He is the son of Joseph Buttigieg, who immigrated to the United States from Malta, and Jennifer Anne Montgomery, a fifth-generation Hoosier.

Growing up in South Bend—which was once home to Studebaker car manufacturing—Pete Buttigieg, like many other Americans in the industrial Midwest, grew up surrounded by empty factories and abandoned houses, sometimes hearing that the only way to a good future was to get out.

He returned to the Midwest after school, worked in the private sector, and was elected Mayor of South Bend in 2011 with a focus on delivering a new future for the city through a fresh approach to politics and bold ideas.

Soon known as “Mayor Pete,” Buttigieg worked across the aisle to transform South Bend’s future and improve people’s everyday lives. Household income grew, poverty fell, and unemployment was cut in half. The city established new resources to extend opportunity and access to technology for all residents, and he launched a “Smart Streets” initiative to improve street design in the downtown and the historically under-resourced West Side. This Complete Streets strategy led to benefits that included small business growth along previously neglected corridors, and hundreds of millions of dollars in new private investment in the once-emptying downtown.

His leadership helped spark citywide job growth and facilitated innovative public-private partnerships like Commuters Trust, a benefits program designed to improve the city’s transportation experience for workers.

At the same time, Mayor Pete worked to build a South Bend community where every resident could feel safe and included. His initiative on municipal identification cards for residents helped to bring undocumented immigrants out of the shadows, while a small business incubator

established in a historically Black neighborhood worked to expand opportunity, and a surge of investment went into repairing or removing abandoned houses in lower-income neighborhoods.

In 2019, he launched his historic campaign for president. Throughout 2020, he campaigned for the election of the Biden-Harris ticket and served on the advisory board for the presidential transition. In December, he was nominated by President-elect Biden to be Secretary of Transportation. He was confirmed by the Senate on February 2, 2021, becoming the first openly gay person confirmed to serve in a president's Cabinet.

Secretary Buttigieg lives with his husband Chasten and their rescue dogs, Buddy and Truman.