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Greetings to my colleagues from the International High-Speed Rail Association (IHRA)!

My name is Robert Lauby – Bob Lauby to my friends and colleagues – and I am honored to be one of the new members of the IHRA Technical Advisory Board. I know some of you already, as I presented at the IHRA Tokyo forum last November.

I am a mechanical engineer and the former Associate Administrator for Railroad Safety and Chief Safety Officer for the Federal Railroad Administration (FRA), an agency of the United States Department of Transportation. The FRA is responsible for the safety and oversight of intercity passenger and freight operations. FRA fulfills this responsibility by developing federal safety regulations and enforcing those regulations through a team of 450 railroad safety inspectors stationed around the nation. In my role as Associate Administrator and Chief Safety Officer, I was responsible for all of these activities.

I retired from FRA in April of 2019 after over 40 years of diverse experience in the railroad industry. I worked for Conrail, a US Freight Railroad; for Knorr Bremse, an international railroad brake system manufacturer; for the US National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB), a federal accident investigation agency; for Booz Allen Hamilton, an international consulting firm; and finally, for FRA. Today, I continue to do part-time consulting work from my home in Virginia.

Throughout my career, I have always had some level of responsibility for safety and I approach this latest assignment on the IHRA Technical Advisory Board from the perspective of an experienced railroad safety professional. A major activity at both NTSB and FRA was railroad accident investigation. At NTSB I ran the railroad safety program and was responsible for investigating tragic railroad accidents that occurred throughout the United States. I continued to investigate railroad accidents at both Booz Allen Hamilton and at FRA. Overall, I have investigated hundreds of railroad accidents in the United States and internationally, many involving fatal injuries to passengers and train crews. My objective has always been to ensure that the lessons learned from tragic accidents not be forgotten. These lessons must be considered when we regulate and operate our railroads to ensure that these accidents can never reoccur.

I also have been involved in high-speed rail accident investigations. In 1999, while at NTSB, I was sent to Germany to gather information on the Eschede accident involving the German ICE high-speed train. The purpose of the trip was to gather any information that could be used to improve the safety of the new Amtrak Acela service slated to operate between Boston, New York and Washington DC later that year.

The Eschede accident was the first significant high-speed rail accident to occur anywhere in the world. One hundred were injured and 101 died in the accident. I learned from that accident that the derailment of high-speed rail equipment at track speeds for any reason was unacceptable and must be prevented at all costs.

At the time of the accident, a senior German official stated to the media that the Eschede accident would not be another Hindenburg. He was referring to the zeppelin Hindenburg which caught fire and burned in 1937 in Lakehurst, New Jersey killing dozens. The Hindenburg disaster essentially killed the airship industry and the age of ocean crossing zeppelins came to an end. Public confidence was destroyed along with the airship. There was a real risk that the Eschede accident, the first of its kind with 101 fatalities, might do the same for the high-speed rail industry in Germany. It was only through Deutsche Bahn's firm actions to address and correct the technical issues with the ICE train that public confidence was restored in the German high-speed rail system.

Since Eschede, there have been other high-speed rail accidents around the world – in Spain, Italy, France, and China to name a few. The United States has also had significant accidents on the higher-speed lines on the Northeast Corridor including a tragic overspeed derailment of an Amtrak Regional train at Frankford Junction, Pennsylvania in 2015. The Frankford Junction accident killed 8 passengers and injured 100 more. There are many important lessons from these accidents that need to be remembered as we move forward to both build and expand high-speed operations around the world.

I am a lifelong advocate of passenger rail and high-speed rail transportation. During my career, I have experienced high-speed rail systems firsthand in Japan, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Korea, and China. I am always inspired by the actions of the national governments that initiate and build such remarkable and impressive systems. These high-speed rail systems serve as economic engines for communities. I see the need for the same benefits for my own country but am disappointed that the United States, a country with an outstanding aviation and interstate highway network, and the world's best freight network, has not aggressively pursued high-speed rail within its borders.

I have worked on several high-speed rail projects during my career including high-speed rail projects in Florida, California, Nevada, Texas and the Northeast Corridor. Some of these projects continue to move forward but many have been delayed, downsized or abandoned.

I believe that the best hope for true high-speed rail in North America currently resides in Texas where work continues to bring 200-mph high-speed trains based on the Tokaido Shinkansen to Dallas and Houston. I have always sought to be part of a successful high-speed rail project in the US and, as such, am assisting Texas Central Railroad to obtain regulatory safety approval for their project.

So, this is my background and these are the experiences I bring to the IHRA and the Technical Advisory Board. I am an advocate for high-speed rail systems but will always approach high-speed rail from the safety perspective. I know from experience that new systems must be safe and reliable to receive the government and public support needed to make these systems successful. We can ill afford to continue to have significant derailments or accidents. These occurrences must not be tolerated in our transportation systems. They have the potential to not only kill and injure many people but also the potential to hamper the future growth of the high-speed rail industry.

I look forward to working with my colleagues on the Technical Advisory Board to bring safe and reliable high-speed rail systems to the United States and to the world.

Bob Lauby