

President Obama Taps Charlotte Mayor as Transportation Secretary

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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President Obama has made his first nomination of an African-American to his cabinet this term, winning accolades from some African-American leaders.

Charlotte, N.C. Mayor Anthony Foxx, nominated as Secretary of Transportation this week, will now go under scrutiny by the U. S. Senate, which has to confirm all presidential cabinet members.

Foxx was thrust into the national lime light last year as his city hosted the Democratic National Convention in September. In his nomination speech, President Obama said it was Charlotte's growth under Foxx's leadership that underscored his qualifications.

"When Anthony became mayor in 2009, Charlotte, like the rest of the country, was going through a bruising economic crisis. But the city has managed to turn things around," the President described. "The economy is growing. There are more jobs, more opportunity. And if you ask Anthony how that happened, he'll tell you that one of the reasons is that Charlotte made one of the largest investments in transportation in the city's history.

The President continued, "Since Anthony took office, they've broken ground on a new streetcar project that's going to bring modern electric tram service to the downtown area. They've expanded the international airport. And they're extending the city's light rail system. All of that has not only helped create new jobs, it's helped Charlotte become more attractive to business. So I know Anthony's experience will make him an outstanding Transportation Secretary."

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The President's cabinet includes the vice president and the heads of 15 executive departments. If Foxx is approved by the Senate, he will be one of only two African-American cabinet members so far. The other is Attorney General Eric Holder, appointed in Obama's first term.

In his few minutes of remarks, Foxx seemed to immediately take charge.

"There is no such thing as a Democratic or Republican road, bridge, port, airfield or rail system," he said. "We must work together across party lines to enhance this nation's infrastructure."

Among the invited guests looking on from the audience in the East Room of the White House were Black leaders Ralph Everett, president/CEO of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies; Michael Grant, president/CEO of the National Bankers Association (NBA); Ron Busby, president/CEO of the U. S. Black Chamber of Commerce, and Julie Compton, president/CEO of the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO). Joining Obama and Foxx on stage was current Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

Within minutes after the President's televised announcement, accolades started to fly.

"I am especially pleased the President has appointed Anthony Foxx as Secretary of Transportation. Through his work as mayor and as a city councilman in Charlotte, Anthony addressed the needs of an area that experienced tremendous growth within the past decade," said U. S. Rep. Marcia Fudge (D-Ohio), chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, in a statement.

Fudge has been among the most vocal critics of the fact that President Obama had not appointed the first African-American to his cabinet this term. She recently sent a letter expressing her disappointment, then changed her tune after a conversation with a White House representative. She then said she would take a wait and see attitude.

"Anthony will surely be an asset to the President's cabinet and to this nation and I look forward to working with him to ensure the needs of our country's transportation system are adequately met," she said in the statement.

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Other groups followed suit.

“Under his Administration, Charlotte has grown to what is called one of America’s most vibrant cities,” said a release from the National Conference of Black Mayors.

Rev. Al Sharpton’s National Action Network said it is “delighted with the nomination.” The NAN statement from Janaye Ingram, Washington Bureau Chief, continued, “We have worked with outgoing Secretary LaHood, most recently having hosted him at our 15th Annual National Convention in New York City. During his plenary session, Secretary LaHood committed DOT to working with NAN to expand opportunities for minorities in relation to jobs and procurement opportunities as well as creating open dialogue with members of the community. We look forward to continuing to work together with the Department of Transportation under the leadership of Mayor Foxx and urge Senate to confirm him without delay.”

Likewise, the Conference of Minority Transportation Officials (COMTO) posted a release on its website saying Foxx has been a “strong proponent of transportation issues and small businesses.”

The release quotes COMPTO President/CEO Julie Compton as saying, “It was an absolute honor to attend today’s announcement of the Mayor’s nomination by President Obama...We congratulate Mayor Foxx and look forward to working closely with him as COMTO continues our commitment to a diverse and inclusive transportation industry.”

Despite the praise for the Foxx appointment, some are still waiting and watching the President’s future moves. A string of Black leaders have signed a letter asking the President to appoint Small Business Administration’s second in command, Marie Johns, to head that agency. That letter was written by Black Chamber President Ron Busby and signed by leaders of organizations, including the NAACP, the National Urban League and the NBA.

Meanwhile, NUL President/CEO Marc Morial, himself a former mayor had high accolades for Foxx.

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“Mayor Foxx brings a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between transportation and economic development, including the practical implications of a top-tier infrastructure on job creation. His vision for and experience in creating an advanced transit system to help ensure the competitiveness of the dynamic city of Charlotte and the businesses that operate there will translate well to this role - where strategic innovation will be required to drive economic growth and continued recovery,” Morial said in a statement.

The Black Mayors’ release was also quick to point out that Foxx was the president’s first Black appointee this term. It states:

“Mayor Foxx will be the first African American nominated to the president’s cabinet this year, and if confirmed, he will be one of two African Americans, in addition to Attorney General Eric Holder, serving in the Cabinet.”