

INFRASTRUCTURE AND TRANSPORTATION

CREATE A NATIONAL INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN A Unified Vision for Transportation Policy

Background

Roads and transit systems are aging and in dire need of repair. Tens of thousands of bridges are structurally deficient. The result: physical neglect, congestion and environmental degradation now seriously compromise the efficiency of a network crucial to the national interest, with a price tag of needs conservatively estimated in the hundreds of billions.

Concerns triggered by several tragic, high-profile failures of our existing infrastructure—from the levies in New Orleans to the bridge collapse in Minneapolis—produces anxiety about the current state of U.S. infrastructure and what impact that neglect is having on our nation’s cities, suburbs and metropolitan areas.

Concerns also exist about what kind of infrastructure we’re building today. Alaska’s infamous “Bridge-to-Nowhere” became a catch phrase for a political and decision-making process gone wild. Today, the word *infrastructure* is more often linked with the word *pork* than with the concept of *competitiveness*.

Absent federal leadership, no overarching vision, goals or guidance exists. Federal transportation policy has hardly recognized the growth of metropolitan areas where most commuters live. Policy continues to favor roads over transit and other non-motorized alternatives.

Recommendations

If transportation policy is going to achieve critical national objectives in an era of fiscal constraints, it will require a twenty-first-century vision. More specifically, the new administration and Congress should consider:

- Investing in infrastructure that supports the competitiveness and environmental sustainability of the nation, rather than on funding individual states or singular needs;
- Authorizing a permanent, independent commission—the Strategic Transportation Investments Commission—to prioritize federal investments in maintaining the interstate highway system, developing a true intermodal freight agenda and improving inter-metro area passenger travel;
- Embracing market mechanisms and establishing a national policy for metropolitan road pricing to allow for better management of the metropolitan network;

- Pursuing a strategy of “modality neutrality,” that enables metro areas to meet their goals on economy competitiveness, environmental sustainability, and/or equity by the best means available, rather than being constrained by rules governing a particular mode—highway, transit, bike/pedestrian, air;
- Awarding challenge contracts to entice states and metropolitan areas to devise their own visions for coping with congestion and greenhouse gas emissions across transportation, housing, land use, economic development and energy policies; and
- Taking steps to ensure that grantees apply rigorous benefit/cost analyses to any project that uses federal funds. High performing federal grantees, where possible, could be given relief from regulatory and administrative requirements to accelerate project delivery.

Key Facts

- A large portion of the American workforce is concerned about the size of household spending on transportation-related items such as gasoline. Transportation is now the second largest expense for most American households, consuming on average 20 cents out of every dollar.
- There is growing concern about a “perfect storm” of environmental and energy sustainability, and the role transportation plays. The continued growth in driving is projected to cancel out both the benefits from vehicle efficiency and fuel alternatives. At the same time, the U.S. is still overly dependent upon petroleum-based fuel imported from unstable nations.
- Reauthorization of the federal government’s most recent transportation plan—the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act—is scheduled for 2009; the Highway Trust Fund, used to pay for highway and transit projects, is projected to go bankrupt in 2009 without congressional action.

Brookings Experts

Bruce Katz, director of the Metropolitan Policy Program, was chief of staff at the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and staff director of the Senate Subcommittee on Housing and Urban Affairs.

Robert Puentes, fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program and director of the program’s Metropolitan Infrastructure Initiative, was director of infrastructure programs at the Intelligent Transportation Society of America.

Required Reading

“[A Bridge to Somewhere: Rethinking American Transportation for the 21st Century](#),” Robert Puentes, Blueprint for American Prosperity Paper, June 2008

“America’s Infrastructure: Ramping Up or Crashing Down,” Bruce Katz, Robert Puentes, Christopher Geissler, Brookings Conference Report #21, January 2008

“An Economic Strategy for Investing in America’s Infrastructure,” Manasai Deshpande and Douglas W. Elmendorf, A Hamilton Project Strategy Paper, July 2008