

Don't Look to Congress for a Solution to the Nation's Long-Term Transportation Woes

Allowing Private Sector Innovation Holds the Most Promise, if Government Doesn't Impede Progress

In spite of the political theatre about reviving a wheezing Highway Trust Fund that is running a deficit and the fact that Congress has not passed a long-term transportation bill since 2005, increasing government spending has not significantly improved infrastructure performance and is the wrong way to solve the nation's infrastructure woes, according to a new paper published by the Reserve Bank of Australia by Brookings Searle Freedom Trust Senior Fellow Clifford Winston. Instead, he argues, implementing private sector technologies hold the most promise for improvements for the American traveler. Government can help by not impeding private sector efforts.

In "How the Private Sector Can Improve Public Transportation Infrastructure," Winston notes there is no "strategy" in the public sector's decades-long history of increasing spending to build the nation's way out of congestion and the public sector is unlikely to ever develop a sustainable strategy that could improve infrastructure performance. Accordingly, Winston suggests three ways that the private sector could help: purchase infrastructure facilities from the government and operate them more efficiently (privatization); develop technological innovations that the public sector could implement to improve current infrastructure performance; and make technological advances that greatly improve the operations of transportation modes that use the infrastructure.

All the options are promising, but outright privatization may be premature without experiments in the United States given the mixed experience with privatization in other countries. Winston therefore believes that the best course of action is to rely on the private sector to develop technological advances in the major modes and for the government not to impede those advances. Policymakers have shown a decided lack of interest in implementing technological innovations to improve transportation, he says. For example, they could encourage the use of technologies such as:

- GPS devices, Bluetooth signals, and mobile software applications to provide motorists with real-time information about traffic speeds, volumes, and conditions on alternate routes, thereby allowing drivers to make better informed decisions about their routes.
- Weigh-in-motion capabilities to provide real-time information about truck weight and axle configurations to do away with weigh-stations and to set efficient pavement-wear charges, which would encourage truckers to shift to vehicles with more axles that do less damage to roads.
- Governments also could apply adjustable-lane technologies and variable speed limits, adapting to traffic flows, and could set real-time tolls to encourage drivers to explore alternative routes, modes, and times of day to travel.
- Efficiency in air travel could be enhanced through technologies such as heated runways, which would reduce delays caused by time-consuming manual snowplowing; advanced screening technologies, such as full-body scanners and biometrics, to speed security measures; and the adoption of a next-generation satellite-based air traffic control system known as NextGen.

Unfortunately, the government has a "status quo" bias, Winston argues, which impedes the adoption of new technologies and slows economic progress. Fortunately, the private sector does not share this bias, he finds, pointing out that in spite of public sector foot-dragging, the private sector continues to innovate in myriad ways, such as: automobile safety technological advances, including electronic stability control, warning and emergency braking systems, speed alerts, and mirrors with blind spot warnings; airlines have installed more powerful and efficient jet engines and are planning to incorporate improved wing designs to reduce fuel consumption.

Moreover, major innovations in the modes are on the horizon. There is no doubt that driverless cars and trucks can be operated effectively, gathering and reacting to real-time information about traffic conditions and eliminating human failings, such as distracted or impaired driving; digital communications and GPS could automate routine air traffic control measures; and drones could be used for commercial purposes—if the FAA would lift its ban on their use; Innovations in transportation modes could significantly improve the efficiency and safety of current infrastructure and significantly reduce the need for government to pass huge spending bills to expand transportation capacity.