

Transport Topics

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A Modern National Transportation Policy

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Fifty years ago, a post-war America was enjoying a booming economy. Businesses were thriving, consumers were buying goods

and our population of 152 million people was on the move. The price of gas was 29 cents a gallon, and jet and diesel fuel were even less.

To help support this emerging economy and mobile population, the government began a successful new Interstate Highway System that added 46,876 miles of multilane routes to meet the nation's increasing transportation demands.

Over the past two decades, however, the federal government has dropped the ball on our evolving transportation requirements. While globalization developed, technology advanced and consumer consumption increased dramatically, Congress sat on the sidelines unaware of the nation's growing capacity crunch.

Today, we suffer from an overloaded infrastructure that has caused congestion, environmental harm, inefficient movement of goods and waste throughout our economy. The once grand system of interstate highways is overburdened, underfunded, badly in need of repair and often ineffective — a casualty of increased consumer demand, urban density and globalization. It is rapidly becoming incapable of meeting the requirements of our population of 300 million persons — double that of 50 years ago.

The average price of gasoline is now around \$3 a gallon, with diesel about the same, and both will likely increase as fuel taxes double and the price of crude goes up — possibly as high as \$80 a barrel. We have gone from a "cheap fuel era" to one of volatile fuel pricing — forced to "reprice" fuel on a grand scale.

When we reprice fuel so drastically, we reshape the nation's transportation sys-

tem. Because we have not anticipated this change, the nation's infrastructure is in critical shape.

The Department of Transportation estimates our economy in 2050 will be four times as large as today and will generate a 50% increase in transportation activity over the next 20 years. There is no way our existing transportation system can handle this surge.

The challenge in solving our transportation needs lies in a total rethinking of our nation's transportation policy to produce a seamless, high-capacity intermodal network for the 21st century. What worked 50 years ago, when fuel was cheap and plentiful, cannot work in today's emerging global economies, increased consumer consumption and strained capacity. We need a new, ethical transportation agenda that utilizes the strengths of all modes.

What can the nation do to create a thoughtful, up-to-date transportation agenda? Several strategies must be undertaken if we are to reshape the nation's transportation policy:

We must make government authorities at all levels — but primarily the federal government — understand that when we make transportation policies, we do not think just of our aging interstate highway network. The billions of dollars needed to repair and maintain this system would create only a small amount of additional capacity and simply move today's road congestion from one location to another. The cost would be borne by general taxpayers as higher taxes and by consumers in the form of higher prices, and would not solve the problem. Government policymakers must think multimodal and intermodal.

We need to support the freight railroads so they can work with the trucking, shipping and airline industries. We have a huge railroad right-of-way network that connects most of North America. This continental network serves 90 states and provinces and almost 400 million people via 240,000 miles of right-of-way already

owned by the railroads. Yet, our existing transportation policy does not take advantage of this priceless asset and its huge untapped capacity.

A thoughtful, modern national transportation policy would properly fund an intermodal transportation system. A new policy could provide the rail system in North America with tax-exempt bonds to finance the method of connecting all our ports, major cities and transportation modes. This new funding policy will not be cheap but will accelerate our intermodal transportation network and put a huge dent in our cost to the economy in future years.

I also strongly support the proposed 25% tax credit for freight railroad capital investments that would add substantial spending for track capacity expansion and service enhancements.

Lastly, the nation and transportation industry must place greater emphasis on this "new science of transportation." Intermodal education is essential to addressing the reforms needed and will refocus and reshape our next generation of transportation leaders.

These are some of the things our state and federal authorities, in association with the freight and passenger industries, can do to help develop a new national transportation policy for the 21st century.

While there is much to be done, I am optimistic. The debates now taking place in Congress, the activity at the state DOT levels and especially the innovation seen in the private sector tell me that people are becoming more aware of the value of intermodal ship-to-train-to-truck transportation and the fact it can play a major role in solving our freight capacity problems.

Now the federal government must do its part in rewriting its transportation policy and provide the funding the nation needs to develop a 21st-century Interstate II transportation system.

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Opinion