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VIEWPOINT

by Gil Carmichael

Getting Government to Understand The New Science of Transportation

A freight transportation revolution has taken place in the past 25 years. Consumer demand, technology, expanding population centers, and vast global enterprises have combined to make intermodal the international standard for moving goods.

Unfortunately, when it comes to U.S. government policy-making, ignorance of intermodal freight transportation is almost universal. The nation's government agencies have not kept pace with intermodal's revolution; have not addressed the nation's capacity concerns; have not dealt effectively with the current energy crisis; and have not been willing to address the need for intermodal education that will meet the transportation demands of the 21st century.

Private industry understands why intermodalism succeeds. Its interconnections, containerization, speed, safety, reliable scheduling, economic feasibility, and fuel efficiency marshal the strengths of each individual transport mode, while avoiding modal weaknesses. Most of all, intermodal is customer-driven—not held hostage by outdated transportation agency thinking.

Continuing ignorance on the part

of our public officials leads to bad decision-making and missed opportunities. And this has consequences.

It leads, for instance, to one-dimensional thinking. Federal and state governments still concentrate on infrastructure, but don't pay much attention to how it is actually used—or where the most promising opportunities exist.

This "old infrastructure mentality" causes government agencies to view the modes in isolation, much as they did in the 1950s when the Interstate Highway System—a vertical transportation system—was inaugurated.

SITTING ON THE SIDELINES

Congress continues to manage a wide range of transportation issues as if it were still 1950. Members talk intermodal but vote for traditional highway projects. I hold out little hope for leadership from Capitol Hill. During the intermodal revolution, Congress sat on the sidelines and still does.

Yet our interconnected intermodal system prospers by efficiently unifying modes horizontally. Intermodal works because it moves a ton of freight for every passenger on our transportation network. And, intermodal has succeeded because it is customer-driven

and responsive to economic demands. Nearly all these freight gains, unfortunately, are attributable to private sector action and investment—not government.

Simply put, government must realize the need for an improved understanding of the "new science of transportation" if we are to meet the economic demands of a 21st-century infrastructure.

The most important step in advancing freight and passenger intermodal transportation is taking a fresh look at the structure and priorities of government agencies. I propose that the chief executive of each state transportation department have two principal deputies—one to oversee policies and programs associated with freight transportation, the other to do the same in passenger transportation. They would soon learn they have to listen to customers.

Executives of these agencies should have a good working knowledge of intermodal principles because a majority of policy decisions and projects need to be carried out with priority given to intermodal improvements—both freight and passenger. Department of Transportation executives should gain this knowledge either through profes-

sional experience in the transportation industry or formal academic training. They won't achieve credibility until they do.

Investing in a horizontal intermodal transportation system is a no-brainer if we want to conserve fuel and keep the cost of goods and services in line. Intermodal investments will pay off if fuel prices rise or fall. The marketplace won't be skewed because energy costs are only one component of the intermodal advantage. If permanent oil shortages are a serious threat, rail can

convert to electricity generated from an alternate source. And the rail mode already carries its container freight nine times farther per gallon of fuel than highway modes.

I urge support for a proposed 25-percent tax credit for freight railroad capital investments that would add substantial revenues for capacity expansion and intermodal service enhancements—our nation's greatest transportation challenge. Meeting even predictable near-term business growth requires a much greater commitment

from government.

The huge North American rail system has been single-tracked for the past 30 years. This right-of-way, already in place and paid for, carries only 25 percent of its capacity. Returning to double- or triple-tracking rails, with grade separations and GPS controls, would create three times more capacity.

Transportation congestion in the United States has reached critical mass. The huge untapped capacity of North American railroad right-of-way may be the solution. ■



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