



Transportation policy needs a push

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Transportation is crucial to keeping the U.S. economy humming. Strategic investments in smart transportation projects with defined outcomes can help ensure our future prosperity. There must be adequate support, both for the maintenance of existing systems and for the expansion and interconnection of new systems. That's not happening now.

Much about our transportation debate is familiar — funding challenges and policy disagreements are always part of the reauthorization process. But these challenges are exacerbated now by a chronic shortfall in revenue for the Highway Trust Fund, the fiscal austerity that is driving our political discourse and a lack of public trust in the federal transportation program.

The tradition of broad bipartisan support for investments in surface transportation has largely broken down. We must get that back.

Research and experience show, however, that this erosion of transportation support does not necessarily extend to the public. Most citizens still voice support for public spending on transportation when they realize it can result in positive local outcomes. The public is also receptive to the message that smart transportation investments make a positive long-term contribution to economic growth, U.S. competitiveness and job creation.

Despite broad support in principle, however, active public engagement on these issues has been elusive. The public must convince our leaders that transportation investment and reform is crucial. While many Americans experience our inefficient transport systems in their daily lives, other national effects — including lost productivity on the broader economy or high transportation costs on the price of goods — are less obvious.

Without a public mandate, most policymakers won't risk reforming the current system in a political landscape fraught with so many other competing demands. The failure last month to reauthorize our long-term highway system funding is just the most recent example. We must create:

1. A positive, forward-looking tone that frames the transportation debate around issues of economic growth, jobs and U.S. competitiveness, combined with quality of life.
2. A well-defined but flexible campaign plan keyed to the rhythms of an election year and important events in the transportation calendar.
3. A focus on building broader engagement through effective, targeted use of traditional media and social media.
4. A concerted effort to link local transportation investment opportunities and benefits to national-level policy decisions.

The outlook for future investment in the U.S. transportation system remains uncertain. Many who have been involved in transportation for decades now say that the future of this

critical economic underpinning looks unclear.

But this indecision, and the resulting stagnation, carry a high price at a time when the stimulus funding of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act is all but exhausted; Highway Trust Fund revenues are projected to remain flat or to decline, and budgets at all levels of government are stretched thin by the recession.

We must harness a confluence of forces this year, including the presidential election, to open the door to fundamental change in transportation policy and programs. The first part of the year has seen some bursts of legislative activity, though it remains unclear whether this can lead to long-term reauthorization.

We are under no illusions about the difficulty of being heard in an election year, let alone the difficulty of setting a substantive reform agenda in motion at a time of extreme political polarization. Nonetheless, we are confident that concerted advocacy can achieve the objective we have set: to raise a sense of urgency about the importance of transportation investment and create conditions for real change in our nation's approach to transportation.

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