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Infrastructure projects need public support, transportation experts say

By [Ashley Halsey III](#), Published: April 23

A coalition of leading transportation experts hope to marshal public pressure on [Congress](#) and [the presidential contenders](#) to address the nation's infrastructure needs.

With long-term transportation funding measures [languishing](#) on Capitol Hill and infrastructure getting little notice in the presidential campaign, "the tradition of broad bipartisan support for investments in surface transportation has largely broken down," the group said.

The plan to energize public support was outlined Monday in a report by transportation experts brought together by the [Miller Center](#) at the University of Virginia. After a [conference](#) this past November, the group concluded that most Americans are aware of the infrastructure crisis and support spending to address it.

"Recent public-opinion surveys have found overwhelming support for the idea of [infrastructure investment](#)," the report said. "After the 'bridge to nowhere' controversies of recent years, the public has become sensitized to issues of pork-barrel spending and understandably demands to see a clear connection between federal expenditures, actual transportation needs, and economic benefits."

Despite apprehension about wasteful spending, the report said, more than two-thirds of voters surveyed by the Rockefeller Foundation said [infrastructure improvement](#) was important and 80 percent said spending on it would create millions of jobs.

The transportation group, co-chaired by former transportation secretaries Norman Y. Mineta and Samuel K. Skinner, compiled a [comprehensive study](#) on infrastructure in 2010. [That report](#) estimated that an additional \$134 billion to \$262 billion must be spent per year through 2035 to rebuild and improve roads, rail systems and air transportation.

Since then, the [American Society of Civil Engineers](#) has estimated that \$1.7 trillion must be invested between now and 2020 to rebuild roads, bridges, water lines, sewage systems and dams that are reaching the ends of their planned life cycles. The [Urban Institute](#) puts the price tag at \$2 trillion.

The spending needs cited by those three groups is in sharp contrast to what Congress is considering as it struggles to come up with new sources to pay for transportation needs: about \$54 billion in annual spending.

Monday's Miller Center report said "the right mix of compelling voices on the local and national stage could spur political leaders to set aside their differences, rise above the current quagmire of inaction, and take steps to adopt and pursue a vision of transportation policy for the 21st century."

Despite "extreme political polarization and intense resistance to public spending of all kinds," the group hopes to use social and mainstream media to deliver a message that infrastructure investment will create jobs and save the United States from a competitive decline in global markets. Their goal is to link the larger issue to local projects, the benefit of which are more readily apparent to voters.

"It is our belief that once citizens become aware of the significant costs and risks associated with a compromised transportation system operating at less than optimal capacity, they will feel more compelled to demand calls for action that will, in turn, prompt policymakers to act," the report said.

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