

# Transportation's Messaging Problem

BY: [Ryan Holeywell](#) | April 5, 2012

Talk to anyone in the transportation community, and they'll say the ongoing debate about the federal highway and transit bill is the biggest issue -- the only issue -- facing Washington. At stake: hundreds of billions of dollars in spending affecting every state, city and county, not to mention huge American industries.

It's a debate that's only become more intense as time has dragged on, and it's been dragging for a while: the last highway and transit bill was passed more than six-and-a-half-years ago.

But look at any survey in which Americans name the most serious challenges facing the country, and transportation infrastructure doesn't register. At all.

For transportation stakeholders, that's a big problem. Now, a growing number of them are shifting their strategies to try to capture an audience that's often left out of the conversation: everyday Americans.

Historically, organizations pushing for increased transportation investment generally don't get grassroots support in the form of rallies and letter-writing campaigns endorsing their cause in the way that organizations involved with high-profile issues like reproductive rights, immigration and the environment do.

Instead, members of the transportation community tend to operate within the Washington echo chamber, with minimal focus on appealing to the everyman. When transportation stakeholders do make their case, their argument has sometimes been a simple one: our roads are crumbling, and we need more money to fix them.

The problem is, as many are starting to realize, that message doesn't resonate. "They can't get constituents to write letters saying 'we need to get DOTs more money, and more work for the road builders,'" says Joshua Schank of the Eno Center for Transportation. Former Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta puts it in even more stark terms, calling infrastructure "a ho-hum subject" to most people. "Everyone falls asleep about it," Mineta said at a recent transportation event in Washington.

In the coming weeks, University of Virginia's Miller Center, a policy think tank, will release a report explaining how the transportation community can retool its message. Already, the organization has opted to stop harping on crumbling infrastructure. "Nobody believes it," says Jeffrey Shane, a former USDOT undersecretary who's a visiting fellow at the Miller Center.

Others are trying to change the conversation too. Building America's Future Education Fund, a bipartisan group calling for infrastructure investment, ran television ads in early Republican primary states New Hampshire and South Carolina. The group learned during focus groups that Republican primary voters would support infrastructure spending -- so long as it came with reforms. So instead of emphasizing crumbling infrastructure in their ads, BAF Ed Fund focused on the importance of having a long-term plan and avoiding cost overruns.

The American Society of Civil Engineers has tried to bring the issue home as well, putting it in terms that even people who aren't transportation wonks can understand. Among the costs affiliated with a deteriorating transportation system are increased maintenance and repair costs to the family car. ASCE also cites the damage the economy at-large would suffer without an effective transportation network.

Still, ASCE President Andrew Hermann acknowledges, it seems that the message may not be resonating -- at least not yet -- given the relative inattention the general public has paid to the issue. "Obviously, we're not getting loud enough," Hermann says. "If we don't educate the public that we have a need, they won't contact legislators, and we won't get anything,"

But what may be at the root of the problem is the fact that anyone who isn't well-versed in transportation policy would have a hard time noticing the infrastructure funding crisis, based on the actions and rhetoric of Congress.

The Highway Trust Fund -- the primary account used to fund federal spending on roads and transit -- is in fiscal straits. Some time during 2013, its highway account will no longer be able to meet its obligations. The same will happen to the transit account in 2014.

That's largely because the federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon of gasoline isn't tied to inflation and hasn't been increased since 1993. As a result, its purchasing power has declined dramatically. Yet members of Congress on both sides of the aisle, as well as President Obama, have opposed any proposals to increase the gas tax to help shore up the fund.

That dichotomy is illustrated perfectly by a recent op-ed penned by Republican Sen. Bob Corker of Tennessee in the *Washington Post*. His piece noted "two options for restoring sound financing" to the highway bill: cut spending on transportation, or cut spending elsewhere.

Corker didn't mention the other option -- increasing revenue -- that almost every association, industry, and academic involved with transportation policy believes is necessary.

Yet Corker's approach isn't unique among federal lawmakers, and the idea of a gas-tax hike is so politically unpalatable that it's not just opposed by legislators; it's simply not discussed. Instead, lawmakers have assembled piecemeal solutions (like finding revenue in something called the Leaking Underground Storage Tank Fund) to help bridge the funding gap. As one lobbyist noted, "most supporters of the bill couldn't understand or explain (or even seem to care much about) the funding gimmicks" in the Senate's highway bill.

Meanwhile, in the midst of a presidential election, neither of the GOP front runners has spent much time addressing transportation. Rick Santorum appears to have no mention of transportation policy on his campaign website, and Mitt Romney's mentions of the subject are minimal. Meanwhile, President Obama hasn't played a major role in the debate about transportation policy. Last year, his budget called for doubling transportation spending, but Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood [told](#) reporters that it was Congress's job to figure out how to pay for it.

"[A]t the most basic level, no one in Washington has mustered the will to tell Americans the truth: 'Transportation isn't free'," [writes](#) *Streetsblog's* Ben Goldman.

What is clear is that by not acknowledging the revenue question, lawmakers of both parties aren't doing much to help educate citizens about fiscal challenges facing the transportation system. "One of these days, there needs to be a conversation: what do the people in America want to pay for?" says Bill Kennedy, a commissioner from Yellowstone County, Mont. who served on a federal panel charged with figuring out how to pay for infrastructure. "The reality is, people don't understand what it costs to maintain a roadway or build a new roadway."

The irony, of course, is that in many instances citizens have [shown](#) they are willing to pay for investments in transportation at the local level. In local elections last year, voters supported increasing revenue to pay for transit projects in about 79 percent of cases, according to Center for Transportation Excellence. This year, high profile votes will likely be posed to residents in and around Atlanta, Denver, Oakland and Raleigh for transportation projects.

Visit any city council in America, and it's clear that transportation is an issue that citizens are especially engaged in, whether it's asking for a pothole to be repaired or a new stop sign to be erected. That, counter-intuitively, may be hurting the case for federal investment in infrastructure: citizens view transportation as a local issue, even though 20 percent of highway and transit spending comes from the feds.

Schank, of Eno, says citizens won't clamor for more federal spending on transportation until lawmakers prove to citizens that they'll spend it more wisely. That doesn't mean delivering earmarks to particular communities; instead, it means eliminating programs that don't have a clear national benefit (like the \$8

million in federal spending to preserve historic covered bridges) and instead showing that transportation infrastructure can drive the economy, reduce dependence on foreign oil, and improve safety.

More importantly, Schank says, it means coming up with metrics to prove to Americans that their investment is paying off. "We have to somewhere demonstrate value in what people are paying for," says Schank.

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