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Too little is spent on transportation

By: **Rep. Peter DeFazio**
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It's impossible to envision the United States without its transportation system.

George Washington knew we needed a "smooth way" — a road connecting Eastern cities with Western territories if our nation was to survive. Dwight Eisenhower modernized it by creating the Interstate Highway System, linking our nation like never before. It was during Ronald Reagan's presidency that we integrated investment in transit into the Highway Trust Fund. And generations in Congress invested in this vision, knowing our transportation system is what binds our national economic well-being, security and people together — until now.

Meaningful negotiations to craft bipartisan long-term transportation legislation have been held hostage by a minority of representatives who believe the federal government has no role in transportation. These so-called devolutionists would stop all federal investment and, instead, devolve to the pre-Eisenhower era, fracturing the system and giving the responsibility to the 50 states to raise all funds and coordinate investments.

We had this state-based system before Eisenhower's interstates — and it didn't work.

Take, for example, the Kansas Turnpike. Kansas started construction on the turnpike in 1954, with Oklahoma agreeing to build the next segment to continue the project. But funding issues forced Oklahoma to delay. So for the next 18 months, the turnpike ended in Amos Switzer's field at the Kansas/Oklahoma border. For months on end, Amos was left to fish drivers out of his field until the start of the interstate system that finished this badly needed roadway.

Devolutionists would take us back to this disjointed system. They don't care that our transportation system is falling apart.

According to two bipartisan commission reports initiated under the George W. Bush administration, our nation needs to double its current investment in our transportation system just to bring it up to a state of good repair. The National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission said our transportation system has deteriorated so much, "our safety, economic competitiveness and quality of life are at risk."

Today, we are in a race to the bottom, spending a lower percentage of our gross domestic product on crumbling 1950s era infrastructure than many Third World countries, while our economic competitors are investing in state-of-the-art transportation systems.

The Urban Land Institute reports China currently spends 9 percent of its gross domestic product on infrastructure, including transportation. India spends 5 percent — and growing. Yet the United States spends less than 1 percent of its GDP on similar investments. Even countries making austerity cuts, like the United Kingdom, have maintained investments in

their transportation and infrastructure systems because they know these investments produce economic gains and create thousands of good-paying jobs.

We have 140,000 bridges in the federal system in need of substantial rehabilitation or replacement. Rebuilding a bridge means work today for American businesses and workers — steelworkers, engineers, architects and other suppliers. And it leaves an asset that will benefit local communities for generations.

Our transit systems have a \$70 billion backlog of critical infrastructure investment needed for light rail, subways and buses. This means work for high-tech engineering companies and investment in American manufacturing industries that have been decimated by outsourcing.

More than 40 percent of the pavement in the national highways system needs substantial rehabilitation. Reconstruction of our crumbling highways means work for American sand and gravel companies, construction workers and other suppliers to lay the foundation for our roadways.

Every billion dollars invested in transportation infrastructure creates or sustains more than 34,000 jobs and produces \$6.2 billion in economic activity, according to the U.S. Department of Transportation. Transportation investment has the strongest buy-America requirements to ensure federal dollars use American products for these projects.

Devolutionists who say that transportation investments won't create jobs and that our economic future doesn't depend on an efficient and safe system are dead wrong. Supporting the notion that a disjointed state-based system will serve us well is a fool's errand.

We cannot lag behind competitor nations. We must invest in the backbone of our economy to move our goods and people more efficiently, and we desperately need the jobs that come with this investment. There is no more certain way to jump-start our economy, to put people to work and improve our long-term economic competitiveness, than with a robust transportation bill. Now is the time to work together to pass a bill that meets our nation's needs.

Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.) is the ranking member of the Highways and Transit Subcommittee of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

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