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Hammond: Texas, U.S. need better transportation solutions

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As we watch the debate in Washington surrounding the surface transportation bill, many of us outside the beltway can't help but feel like we are witnessing a game of chicken.

Unless Congress is willing to forsake that dangerous game and adopt far-reaching solutions to our growing transportation crisis, this important pillar of our nation's economic underpinning could be set for a

collision.

After all, while the power of the private sector is bolstering many areas of our society and economy, it is disturbing some in Congress are failing to leverage this power to help deliver the roadways we need.

Are these federal legislators so far removed from the limitless possibilities of private investment they are satisfied to live with the status quo and all that it entails — namely crumbling highways and bridges?

The problem is, the status quo won't cut it.

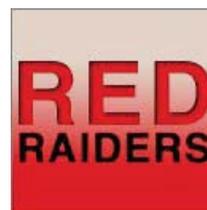
U.S. infrastructure problems worsen daily. The American Society of Civil Engineers recently found the United States needs more than \$200 billion in infrastructure spending in the coming decade to meet the increased demand for new roadways and to maintain existing infrastructure.

The Texas Transportation Institute estimates urban congestion already costs Americans more than \$115 billion per year.

Even more troubling to the taxpayer is these costs will almost certainly increase, given current trends.

For this reason, states like Texas have taken matters into their own hands in recent years, leading the rest of the country in infrastructure development through innovations like public-private partnerships.

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Together with globally recognized and industry-leading developers, the state of Texas has partnered not only to create several billion dollars' worth of new congestion-relieving roadways without raising taxes, but is also putting employees of more than 400 Texas firms to work in the process.

Given Texas' recent success, Congress would do well to consider adopting the following recommendations as part of the transportation bill:

- It's no secret gas tax revenues, which are partially dedicated to transportation projects, aren't keeping pace with demand. In amending the transportation bill, Congress should explore public-private partnerships, new tolling opportunities and increased funding for the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act.

The last thing we need is the current provision of the Senate version of the bill that penalizes states for using innovative means of financing transportation projects.

There are billions of dollars of private equity ready to invest in congestion-relieving roadways. Let's put it to work. Strategic private investments mean roads and other infrastructure can be designed, built and completed years sooner and at vastly reduced public costs.

- Environmental streamlining is another area in which Texas has made significant strides in the past two years to expedite critical projects. Congress needs to follow Texas' lead and allow the environmental process at the federal level to progress quickly with less red tape.

- One critical issue for Texas is the distribution of funds to the states. Under the Senate version of the transportation bill, states are rewarded for past earmarks. Texas, along with 45 other states, fares poorly in that scenario.

All funds available under a new bill should be distributed under fair and equitable formulas, with no consideration of past earmarks. If this provision stands, Texas could see \$315 million less a year than what it should receive by a fair formula allocation. This is outrageous.

Our roads are the lifeblood of our economy. If our infrastructure is not properly maintained and cannot meet traffic demands, both our economy and quality of life suffer.

As demonstrated in Texas, there are many creative ways to increase the capacity of our roadways that stimulate the economy, create jobs and reduce costs for the taxpayer.

Congress must look for the most effective transportation solutions, rather than reinforce the status quo. Drivers and employers expect nothing less.

BILL HAMMOND is president and chief executive officer of the Texas Association of Business.

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