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How Congress can clear a 'gridlock of ideas' on highway funding

By Patrick D. Jones

With two new toll-financed highways opening in the Greater Washington region over the last couple of weeks, it's never been easier for national legislators to get a first-hand look at the future of highway transportation.

The Interstate 95 express lanes in northern Virginia and north of Baltimore are about clearing highway gridlock for local commuters. And with a new Congress taking office in a couple of weeks, the two roads can also help clear a deeper, more pervasive form of gridlock that has slowed down the response to the highway infrastructure funding crisis.

At the opening ceremonies for Virginia's 95 Express Lanes earlier this month, Sen. Timothy Kaine (D-Va.) talked about a "gridlock and congestion of ideas" that has blunted every effort to fund a safe, modern highway system. The two new projects, like the more established 495 Express Lanes in Virginia, show that states know how to fund surface transportation, even if Congress can't agree on a long-term funding package.

In each of the new projects, an essential piece of public infrastructure depended on out-of-the-box thinking:

- The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) entered a public-private partnership to leverage private sector investment to minimize the public contribution and risk and to provide congestion relief as soon as possible through this \$1 billion highway construction project.
- Rather than waiting for federal funds or relying on State gas tax revenues, the Maryland Transportation Authority (MDTA) relied on tolls to help cover the cost of a larger, \$1.1-billion construction project.

During the opening ceremonies in Virginia, Governor Terry McAuliffe (D) cast the express lanes as a successful public-private partnership that opened early and on budget.

"The 95 Express Lanes are an investment in Virginia's economy," he said. "Not only did the project create thousands of jobs during construction and put more than 500 businesses to work, the new infrastructure will also support future economic development and job growth in the region."

Which points to the shining opportunity for Congress to boost the economy and fight highway congestion, just by allowing states to choose the best mix of funding mechanisms to solve their own highway infrastructure problems.

In that sense, the Virginia event was like a punctuation mark between old and new, a capstone on one Congressional year and a positive portent for the next.

In 2014, the White House proposed a **four-year, \$302-billion highway reauthorization package** that included flexibility for states to toll existing interstate highways to fund their reconstruction. In the end, Congress adopted a short-term "patch" to keep the Highway Trust Fund solvent, leaving a growing number of state, regional, and local governments to come up with **their own strategies** to reduce highway congestion.

The expiration of transportation policy in May 2015 gives the new Congress a chance to achieve bipartisan consensus on a problem that has been gathering momentum since the federal gas tax was last increased in 1993. The timing couldn't be better: earlier this month, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) **calculated a \$37 billion gap** between the dollars available for surface transportation and the funds that are needed each year to maintain an aging highway network.

But the solutions are within our grasp. Virginia and Maryland are just two of the states that are getting large, successful projects up and running. Along the way, they're showing that tolling is an important tool in the transportation funding toolbox.

When Congress debates surface transportation funding, the aggregate cost looks daunting. When state officials point to the jobs and other economic benefits in a project like the 95 Express Lanes, the investment makes perfect sense.

That's one more good reason for federal legislators to make 2015 the year in which they unlock the power of state and local governments to get on with the job of rebuilding the national highway network. If members of the new Congress need living examples of what they're trying to achieve, they won't have to travel too far to the north or south to see toll financing in action, making a difference in drivers' lives every day.

Jones is executive director and CEO of the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, the worldwide association for toll facility owners and operators and the businesses that serve them.