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# Capturing and sustaining public interest in transportation

Transportation-related stories have gotten more play than usual in the national media recently, but that is not necessarily good news. Most of the coverage focused on the dire financial state of the Highway Trust Fund (HTF) while also underscoring the need for longer-term, proactive measures that would put the perennially shaky HTF on firmer financial footing.

A short-term measure propping up the HTF with \$10.9 billion and keeping projects active through April 2015 was approved by the Senate in the final hour. President Obama has indicated that he will sign the bill although he, too, has said he is in favor of a longer-term solution. The sentiment echoed widely by the transportation policymakers and leaders—in both congressional houses, on both side of the aisle, and among business interests outside the policy world—is that the short-term fix, while necessary, is not nearly enough.

Eleven former Secretaries of Transportation stressed this point in an open letter last week, stating that, *"We are hopeful that Congress appears willing to avert the immediate crisis. But we want to be clear: This bill will not 'fix' America's transportation system. For that, we need a much larger and longer-term investment. On this, all twelve of us agree."*

Although consensus on the specifics of what long-term legislation might look like cannot be reached, there is near unanimous agreement that the nation's critical transportation needs will not be adequately addressed through one-off, stop-gap measures.

The question then becomes: when is the right time for a bigger fix? Upcoming midterm elections and public distaste for new taxes (even if framed as user fees) were part of the political calculus this year and likely prevented more effort from being directed at the problem. Earlier this year, the White House, the House, and the Senate all offered proposals to address upcoming HTF shortfalls proactively through long-term solutions, but a similar idleness followed when those proposals were met with opposition. What ensued was finger-pointing and charges of obstruction. It was only in the final hour—literally, it was the afternoon of the last session before the August recess and the HTF's expiration—that an agreement was reached. Similar inertia was evident in the last round of reauthorization negotiations, when numerous short-term measures were patched together in the three years between the expiration of SAFETEA-LU and the passage of MAP-21.

When will it be the right time? The thinking then, just as it is now, is that legislators will feel compelled to act decisively on transportation policy only when there is significant public buy-in around the issues of transportation investment and reform.

In 2011, the Miller Center convened its second **David R. Goode National Transportation Policy Conference** due in part to frustration around the lack of public awareness and support that kept significant transportation reform from gaining any traction. The goal of that conference was to create a roadmap for effectively capturing the nation's attention and encouraging active public engagement around the issue.

The recommended communications strategy—gleaned from the conversations during that conference and detailed in this **report**-- must include these four central elements or features to succeed:

- (1) A positive-forward looking tone that frames the transportation debate around issues of economic growth, jobs, and U.S. competitiveness, combined with quality of life.
- (2) A well-defined but flexible campaign plan that is keyed to the rhythms of an election year and to important events in the transportation calendar.
- (3) A focus on building broader engagement through effective, targeted use of traditional and social media.
- (4) A concerted effort to link local transportation investment opportunities and benefits to national-level policy decisions.

A review of these recommendations reveals that today's publicity efforts are framing the messages around these elements.

In line with recommendation #1, the most recent HTF-related messaging *did* implicitly identify the issue as one around economic growth, jobs, U.S. competitiveness, and quality of life. Congress, the president, and representatives from business interests all stressed that the HTF was too important to go bankrupt without significant and wide-ranging consequences at the local, state, and federal levels. Additionally, there is the frequently-cited caveat in those statements that even more should be done to further safeguard the nation's economic interests through a long-term reauthorization. Messaging that identifies transportation as a national economic issue (as opposed to an individualized or local one) must continue to be honed and broadcast widely.

This most recent threat of HTF insolvency was keyed to the rhythms of an election year, as recommended in Idea #2. Although the upcoming midterm elections did not serve as an immediate incentive to resolve the issue, perhaps there is some comfort that, alternatively, members of Congress were also unwilling to take the blame for letting the HTF run dry and critical transportation projects halt in the months before an election. Perhaps a reinvigorated Congress will be eager tackle this issue and demonstrate an ability to "get things done" in this next round of negotiations. Transportation reform enjoys more bipartisan support than most issues, and the need for a long-term reauthorization could be presented as a front burner economic issue. Successful passage of it could be touted by both parties as a noteworthy, bipartisan achievement during a lame-duck Congress.

Traditional and social media have become important platforms for outreach efforts, as suggested in the fourth point above. And regardless of

the opinions that may be presented, those efforts have a net positive impact on social awareness around the issue. President Obama has devoted significant attention to this issue in public appearances and on social media and has made transportation funding a central part of his message about supporting America's middle class. As a result, discussion on the issue—whatever the stakeholder group or medium—has increased, and its importance is frequently couched in similar terms. Sustained efforts to continue to elevate transportation policy in the national consciousness may improve the odds for progress next year.

Finally, there were DOTs public announcements about the the creation of contingency plans in case their shares of HTF funding was lost through July. Although that crisis was averted, the linkage between federal funds and community impact has become much more pronounced. And once citizens become aware of the significant costs and risks that can be felt at all levels from a compromised transportation system operating at less than optimal capacity, the hope is that they will be further compelled to make calls for action.

There are, no doubt, myriad considerations related to this issue and timing, messaging, and political will that will be assessed by transportation stakeholders next year. One can hope that interest will finally coalesce into decisive action around the April 2015 deadline. In the meantime, messaging that underscores transportation's critical importance to the American people and economy can only help the cause, regardless of outcome.

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