

## Finally a Green Light For Smart Infrastructure?

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By Neal Peirce

WASHINGTON — Even as America plunges into recession, a bright shaft of light has appeared.

It's a once-in-a-generation opportunity, driven by a popular president-elect, to mount a massive national infrastructure rebuilding program.



There's no doubt we need it: estimates of our deferred spending on roads, bridges, rail lines, transit, schools, water and sewer systems run into the trillions of dollars. Other nations are racing ahead of us on issues like high speed rail, critical in a post-carbon era. Our long-term global competitiveness is at stake.

Or as Vice President-elect Joe Biden put it in Philadelphia, as he and Obama met with the nation's governors last week: "China invests 7-9 percent of its GDP in infrastructure projects. We invest just 1 percent. There's a reason they have a mag-lev train that can go over 200 miles per hour. I may have a bit of a pro-rail bias, but think of the jobs we could create—in both construction and innovation—if we made similarly bold investments here."

What a change! No administration of the last four decades has had the courage to challenge the country to step up to the plate, to support really serious infrastructure reinvestment for our future.

But the next stimulus package—perhaps \$700 billion, backed by President-elect Obama and a good bet to get swift congressional passage once he's sworn in, provides an ideal vehicle.

Economists often denigrate infrastructure projects as too slow to combat recessions. They've preferred cash infusions like the \$300 government checks President Bush had mailed out earlier this year.

But it's becoming clear the current recession is so deep that people will just pocket quick cash. The time for serious infrastructure projects, covering an extended recession, has arrived.

And lots of projects are “shovel ready” or close to it—a total of \$136 billion, the nation’s governors told Obama in Philadelphia. Among the projects, at both the state and local level, are 3,000 highway and bridge projects (\$18 billion). Hard-pressed transit agencies, ridership up 32 percent since 1995, could mount 559 improvement and repair projects within 90 days. Fifty-eight new and expanded public transit lines, at a cost of \$25 billion, could move into construction within four months to a year. Over \$300 million of bicycle and pedestrian projects are ready-to-go.

Such spending creates blue collar work with ripple effects across the economy, increasing demand for steel and machinery and augmenting, says Obama economic adviser and former Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers, the country’s “productive potential in the long run.”

It’s true, of course, that not all projects are smart ones—the 3,000 highway projects, for example, include a good share of bridges and roads to peripheral developments—or nowhere.

To use this opportunity smartly, it’s critical that stiff “fix it first” criteria be set—early attention to truly imperiled bridges, seriously decayed subway lines and roads, leak-plagued water systems, schools crying out for basic repairs, for example.

But we need a wider vision than that. And if Obama’s to be taken at his word, we need to reject politics favoring friends and insist on core “national priorities” for these times. Energy conservation and reduced greenhouse gas emissions seem to top his list— “freeing our nation from the tyranny of foreign oil, and saving the planet for our children.”

To reach those goals, the mega-infrastructure measure the Obama crew hopes to push through Congress quickly after Jan. 20 will need some real teeth. With a dire recession, job loss, new president and eager Congress, the big stimulus package may be the vehicle for a large share of Obama’s entire agenda—conceivably the most important legislative action in decades.

The measure is likely to push his vision of 2.5 million new “green jobs” (solar, wind power and the like) within two years. And it’s virtually sure to include considerable aid to fiscally floundering state and local governments.

But if the “smart growth” principles Obama has embraced are to be served, it won’t do just to turn huge chunks of cash over to state transportation departments, few questions asked—a step some of the macro-economists signed up early for his White House and administration might unthinkingly make.

States instead could be instructed to use “mode neutral” measures to decide between road and transit projects, and employ a “three e’s” filter—evidence a project not just stimulates the economy, but is also environment-friendly and sensitive to equity issues. Plus, major chunks of the stimulus cash should go directly to existing Metropolitan Planning Organizations, with instructions to give major attention to such Obama priorities as public transit funding, biking, walking and health, maybe even connections with affordable housing.

The political bars to any of these ideas are normally sky-high—indeed prohibitively high. But with the window of opportunity suddenly opened, the new president and Congress actually have it in their power to reset national priorities for decades to come. And with luck and care, to refashion the compact between Washington, the states, cities and metropolitan regions for dramatically better results.

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