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Map a new plan for transportation

Take a big turn to transit's potential

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Our nation spends hundreds of billions of dollars a year on highways, bridges, rail lines, buses and railroads that connect communities, shape patterns of growth and development, and sustain the economy. But there is no comprehensive national transportation policy to drive this titanic task.

Given the energy and environmental challenges of this new century, such an uncharted course is shortsighted, wasteful and practically suicidal.

Developing new transportation policies for the new century will take the kind of commitment and vision that, more than 50 years ago, assembled the interstate highway system. Like President Dwight D. Eisenhower, the next president must harness the national will to meet critical new transportation needs centered in America's cities.

The deadly collapse last year of a four-lane bridge over the Mississippi River in Minneapolis put a glaring spotlight on the nation's aging highways and bridges, and the need for a plan and commitment to rebuild them.

Any national transportation plan must also include a greater investment in intercity rail and transit systems that relieve congestion, conserve energy, preserve air quality and lower the enormous costs of maintaining and expanding highways. Building transit systems also creates jobs and enables entry-level workers without cars to get from central city neighborhoods to suburban employers.

The next six-year federal transportation bill, taking effect in October 2009, must also ensure a fairer return to the nation's urban areas, and more flexibility in how local governments spend federal transportation dollars. A new study by the Environmental Working Group found that commuters in 176 metropolitan areas paid $20 billion more in federal gas taxes than they received in federal Highway Trust Fund money from 1998 through 2003.

Earlier this year, a bipartisan transportation policy and revenue study commission provided a solid, if sobering, blueprint. To fix the nation's flagging highway and rail systems over the next 50 years, the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission recommended more than double the spending, up to $340 billion a year, by federal, state and local governments. That investment would create hundreds of thousands of jobs and hundreds of billions of dollars of development.

In the long run, federal and state governments must find better ways to pay for transportation. Automobile fuel efficiency has doubled since the 1950s. Gas tax revenues trail the rising cost of maintaining roads and bridges. Still, shifting to other revenue sources, such as odometer charges, tolls and peak hour congestion fees, will take years, maybe decades.

The federal Highway Trust Fund is draining rapidly, requiring an immediate boost in the federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon. The commission's recommendation of 25 cents to 40 cents a gallon, through gradual annual increase of 5 cents to 8 cents, is reasonable.

In any case, higher gas prices are inevitable. Global oil production is near its peak; the era of cheap and abundant fossil fuel is over. The nation's economic, environmental and security interests demand less dependence on foreign oil.

If only there were more trains

On a recent Thursday morning, Chris Lucander, a 51-year-old bank executive from Grosse Pointe, drove to the Dearborn train station with his two teenage children to catch an Amtrak train to downtown Chicago. He could have flown or driven, but he figured a 5 1/2 -hour train ride was the most sensible and least stressful route to the Windy City, where he planned to spend two days with his kids, taking in museums and shows.

"Driving can be a hassle and, since 9/11, flying has become a pain," Lucander said, seated comfortably in coach class, a Wall Street Journal in his lap.

A one-way ticket from Detroit to Chicago costs $27, a lot less than a tank of gas. With better connections and travel times, Lucander would take the train more often. High-speed service could eventually cut travel time between Chicago and Detroit to 3 1/2 hours, but travel times and connections to most other places are now far less convenient.

For the first time in decades, the average American motorist is driving less. Rising energy costs will make intercity rail increasingly important for moving people and goods, yet America's railroad system would embarrass Bulgaria. America needs a policy that will get more people like Lucander out of their cars some of the time.

Amtrak will serve a record 26 million riders this year, but Congress has consistently given the railroad hundreds of millions of dollars less than it needs to pay for capital improvements, including the replacement of worn track, repairing bridges and rebuilding rail cars.

Shortsighted cuts

President George W. Bush even tried to end federal assistance for passenger rail service. For next year, Bush has proposed cutting Amtrak by 40%, giving it half the $1.67 billion the agency is requesting. Amtrak spends $500 million a year on debt service alone. Bush's proposed $800 million for Amtrak would require the railroad to cut a large share of its 22,000 miles of service.

Put in perspective, the $1.67 billion Amtrak is requesting for the entire year is little more than the cost of one large planned highway project in metro Detroit: rebuilding seven miles of I-94 in Detroit.

Local rail service is equally vital to the country's economic and social needs, and for reviving the nation's cities and metropolitan regions. Even so, cities can barely afford to maintain existing systems. In Chicago, more than 150 people were injured in 2006 when a train car on the aging L lurched off the rails. Nearly 25% of the Chicago Transit Authority's track is so raggedy that trains made to go more than 50 m.p.h. must sometimes slow to 5 m.p.h.

The federal government's six-year transportation bill, funded mostly by the federal gas tax, remains heavily weighted toward highways. The current bill -- SAFETEALU -- guarantees $286.4 billion, with only 15%, or $45.3 billion, for transit. Bush has also proposed shifting $3.2 billion from the mass transit pot to the highway program.

The Federal Transit Administration can fund only about one in five of the projects that meet its stringent standards. In theory, the feds pay up to 80% of construction costs, but most approved projects now end up getting only 50% or 60%.

Denver sets an example

Federal transit dollars can revitalize a region, as Denver, Colo., is demonstrating.

By 2004, the Mile High City had become one of the nation's most congested cities. Facing gridlock, eight counties in the 2.5-million Denver region approved a 0.4-cent sales tax increase -- 4 cents on $10 -- to pay for a regional rapid transit system called FasTracks. It's a $6.1-billion program to build, over 12 years, 122 miles of light and commuter rail, 18 miles of bus rapid transit, 57 transit stations, and 21,000 parking spaces at bus and rail stations.

The century-old Union Station in the Lower Downtown (LoDo) District will serve as the region's transit hub and center for more than $500 million of office, retail, hotel and residential development.

So far, the Regional Transportation District has built 35 miles of rail.

Denver's business community paid for the $3.6-million campaign to pass the sales tax increase, which voters approved 58%-42%. The tax generates nearly $170 million a year to build and operate the system.

Denver's conservative suburban communities weren't a natural constituency for the nation's largest mass transit project. However, besides the need to reduce congestion, the region had two advantages. First, it had developed a regional approach to issues in the late 1980s, when nine counties passed an arts tax to support Denver's cultural institutions. Second, the region had confidence in the competence of local government. RTD had run, since 1969, a reliable, safe and efficient bus system that suburbanites trusted with their tax dollars.

The complex FasTracks funding package included sales tax bonds, community contributions, private investment, low-interest federal loans, and nearly $2 billion in new-start money from the Federal Transit Administration. FTA paid 55% of construction costs on three major lines.

Potential to reshape cities

Today, mass transit is reshaping the driving and development patterns of metro Denver.

A southwest rail line, extending 8.7 miles from downtown to the southern suburbs, has attracted a sizable slice of peak hour commuters, reducing traffic by 38%. Altogether, light-rail lines carry 62,000 passengers a day, 15% more than projected.

Sandeep Bohra, 25, an electrical engineer who lives on Denver's east side, gave up his car three months ago. He formerly drove an average of 60 miles a day, spending nearly $50 a week on gas and $225 a month to park near his downtown office. Now he rides bus and rail to work, to visit friends, shop at suburban malls or attend Nuggets and Broncos games. He said transit trips are similar to drive times -- and faster during rush hours.

"I don't miss the car or the stress," said Bohra, who also walks more and smokes less since giving up his car.

Downtown Denver, connected by a free shuttle bus, has turned into a delightfully dense and walkable urban neighborhood, with clubs, hip lofts, coffee shops, million-dollar townhouses and high-end retail.

Billions of dollars of retail, residential and office development has started around new transit stations on a rail line connecting downtown and the southeastern part of the region. Over the next 50 years, Denver expects to gain 250,000 residents within a half-mile of the city's transit stations, thereby curbing sprawl.

"There are two ways to get smart growth: You can legislate it, which doesn't work well, or you can make these permanent investments in transit," said RTD General Manager Cal Marsella. "Developers move to these station sites because it makes good business sense."

Transit managers in Denver aren't trying to replace the automobile, but to give people more choices, said Marsella, who drives two miles daily to a suburban park-and-ride and then takes the bus 20 miles to his downtown office.

Change federal priorities

With a little help from the federal government, local governments can develop successful regional transit systems. A country spending more than $120 billion a year in Iraq can't afford to neglect its own mobility needs.

The nation needs a plan from the next president that rebuilds aging transportation networks and helps metropolitan regions build and maintain transit systems that reduce congestion, get people to jobs, improve air quality and conserve energy. That will require the vision and courage that built a great interstate system more than 50 years ago, and the commitment and resources that today are rebuilding another country.