

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Our Nation's Infrastructure and Moving Transportation Forward

Brock Hoegh

My family and I moved to Marietta, Georgia, a suburb north of Atlanta, in November 2011. Growing up in rural Nebraska, I had never really experienced traffic congestion and its overall impact on my quality of life. As I make my daily commute to work, I have often thought to myself, how many hours have I spent sitting in traffic? It is undoubtedly a number I don't want to calculate. My total commute each day is, on average, an hour and half or more. I'm an early riser, which allows me to reduce my morning commute slightly. However, my lengthy daily commute has a high cost, in terms of quality of life, time away from my family, and money.

I work for a leading national transportation planning and engineering firm, and, as many of you know, the infrastructure of the United States is crumbling and has been a focus of US policy for many years. In 2013, the American Society of Civil Engineers provided a report card on the state of the nation's transportation infrastructure, from highways to waterways (ASCE, 2013). The Society gave the US's transportation infrastructure an overall grade of D+. Is that acceptable?

Discussion continues in the US House of Representatives and Senate about the current surface transportation bill. However, with the upcoming 2016 Presidential election, it's hard to believe anything but more extensions to the bill will be passed by Congress. It's difficult to see how the government will pay for the implementation of any new transportation bill without an increase in its revenue.

The federal gas tax, at 18.4 cents per gallon, has not been increased in nearly 20 years. When President Obama signed the 2012 transportation bill, Moving Ahead for

Progress in the 21st Century, it only lasted for 2 years, because Congress was unable to find any more money in the general fund to offset the shortages facing federal gas tax revenues. I may be biased, but we are talking about our nation's highways, bridges, and public transportation systems, components that are critical to our nation's economic success. Not only is it important to maintain our current infrastructure, but expanding our network and modal choices to accommodate the predicted increases in traffic and congestion that are the result of a growing population is crucial.

Let's look at the state I live in – Georgia. I live within the Atlanta Metropolitan region, which, with a population over 5 million people (predicted to be ~8 million by 2030), is one of the nation's most congested cities. Like many states waiting for the next reauthorization of the federal transportation bill, the state of Georgia's legislature took it upon themselves to meet the state's infrastructure needs by passing legislation dedicated to bridge and roadway repair, maintenance, roadway expansion, and even additional allocated monies for transit systems throughout the region via the Transportation Funding Act of 2015, which will initially raise \$945 million per year in new state funding for various transportation purposes, an amount that will increase over time, due to indexing. The bill eliminated Georgia's existing 4% sales tax on gasoline and 7.5 cents per gallon excise tax on diesel fuel, replacing them both with a new 26 cents per gallon excise tax on gasoline and a 29 cents per gallon excise tax on diesel fuel. The new excise taxes will be indexed to the federal fuel efficiency (Corporate Average Fuel Economy or "CAFE") standards and the Consumer Price Index for 2 years, after which time the CAFE standards will be the only indexing measure. Other sources of increased state revenue will include:

1. A new statewide \$5 per night hotel/motel tax;

2. A \$200 per year registration fee for electric cars and a \$300 per year registration fee for commercial electric vehicles; and
3. A new fee on heavy trucks, depending on the vehicle's weight

As cities and states across the country look at such funding mechanisms to rebuild our nation's infrastructure, expanding our already congested roadways may be one solution, but may not always be the answer. There continues to be the need for more modal choices. Local land use and transportation planners need to continue planning, designing, and building infrastructure improvements that positively impact the way we live our lives day to day. One local urban land use designer and transportation planner has aptly described the status of today's infrastructure and ways to better build transportation-related projects using a more holistic approach:

If we build single-purpose transportation infrastructure that only works for some people some of the time, for example, then we not only end up with an inadequate physical structure for the mobilization of our economy, we also get an unsatisfactory social and cultural environment. It's not that the highways that we have obsessed over for the last sixty years are wrong, exactly. They're just not enough. They're not able to generate the rich experiences that we want for our lives on their own.

A more life-affirming approach to infrastructure considers everyone and every aspect of our lives. If we're serious about it, we don't only build infrastructure for people who are able to drive cars and we don't only build it for driving around. Instead, we take a holistic

view of all our aspirations and then we put the tools in place to deliver those outcomes. We design a physical structure that can cultivate suitable conditions to create a business or raise a family in the way that meets our highest expectations. In the process, we make valuable cultural, social, and economic contributions to the broader community. (Gravel, 2015)

I'm currently managing a multimodal transportation project in downtown Atlanta and was recently able to enjoy the trails along the Atlanta Beltline Project, which, in the future, will also have streetcar

elements (currently being designed). I have also had the opportunity to tour the presently under-construction Transbay Transit Center (in San Francisco, California) and the now-completed Denver Union Station (in Colorado). All of these projects are visionary transportation and planning projects that have and will transform their respective cities by creating transit-friendly areas where individuals or families can live, work, and play.

These are projects that can be catalysts to improve the vitality and livability of the city and region in which they are located and have all the ingredients for future success. What is exciting to realize is that, as these visionary transportation projects

positively impact the communities of those living and working nearby, other communities around the country may change their perspective on infrastructure development, shaping new transportation infrastructure improvements for our nation's future.

References

- ASCE. 2013. 2013 Report Card for America's Infrastructure. Available at <http://www.infrastructurereportcard.org> (accessed July 27, 2015).
- Gravel, R. 2015. You Deserve Better Infrastructure. Available at <http://ryangravel.com> (accessed August 4, 2015).