


[About Us](#)
[Events](#)
[Advocacy](#)
[Resource Center](#)
[Membership](#)
[News](#)
[Marketplace](#)
[TOLLWAYS](#)

## Commentary - Living in Denial



### INNOVATION BRIEFS

NEWS ANALYSIS

Ken Orski

The reaction of various advocacy groups to President Obama's recent call for a \$50 billion stimulus spending plan for transportation infrastructure was predictable. They applauded the President's initiative and thought that Congress should promptly approve the spending request. The benefits of investing in infrastructure are undisputable and the need for funds is urgent and compelling, they (or their press releases) proclaimed.

But convincing the next Congress of the need to act, whether to fund the infrastructure "down payment" of \$50 billion or to authorize a proposed \$500 billion multi-year surface transportation program, will not be easy. Most congressional lawmakers do not perceive infrastructure as an urgent priority. They see no signs of a popular outcry about the stalled transportation reauthorization, nor do they perceive a groundswell of grassroots support for massive transportation investments.

Indeed, what the lawmakers see is just the opposite. They witness New Jersey voters strongly approving Governor Chris Christie's decision to cancel work on the long-planned rail tunnel under the Hudson River because, says the Governor, "the state simply doesn't have the money" to pay for overruns in the potential \$9-14 billion project. Mr. Christie, no doubt, has in mind the experience of Boston's Big Dig which was projected in 1982 to cost \$2.8 billion and ended up costing \$15 billion.

The lawmakers also see Republican candidates for governor in California (Meg Whitman), Florida (Rick Scott), Ohio (John Kasich) and Wisconsin (Scott Walker) pledging to cancel high-speed rail projects in their states if elected — and running ahead of their Democratic opponents who unanimously support President Obama's \$8 billion high-speed rail initiative. They see the public greeting with a yawn a bold and visionary Amtrak proposal to link Boston and Washington with a dedicated high-speed rail line. They read in a much noticed Sunday Times Magazine article "Education of a President," (October 12) that the President himself thinks "there's no such thing as 'shovel-ready projects' when it comes to public works." And they hear an Administration unable to explain how the \$50 billion infrastructure initiative will be paid for. When asked, a top administration official could only lamely reply "Stay tuned, we'll let you know."

More evidence of public reluctance to spend on infrastructure comes from the findings of a new October 2010 survey by the Pew Center on the States and the Public Institute of California titled "Facing the Facts: Public Attitudes and Fiscal Realities in Five Stressed States." By a large margin, respondents in five states (California, Arizona, Florida, Illinois and New York) showed a strong unwillingness to support additional transportation funding and offered to put transportation on the chopping block when asked which of their state's biggest expenses they would least protect from budget cuts.

It may be impolitic to suggest it, but dire warnings about the sorry state of the nation's infrastructure seem to come largely from organized interests — stakeholders and advocacy groups. That is not to say that the nation's transportation infrastructure has not been neglected or that America does not need better roads and transit systems. But rightly or wrongly, congressional lawmakers often discount cries about "crumbling infrastructure" as self-serving demands for more government money, often for projects that yield small economic return.

Moreover, many lawmakers come from rural districts that experience little traffic congestion, whose roads are well maintained and which never hope to benefit from high-speed rail service. Their reluctance to spend more money on public works also has been fueled by what they see as disappointing results from the stimulus initiative. As Rep. John Mica (R-FL), ranking member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee and potential future T&I Committee chairman in the 112th Congress likes to point out, more than 60 percent of the stimulus infrastructure dollars still remain unspent, while unemployment in the construction industries remains high. All this adds weight to the legislative reluctance to tackle an ambitious infrastructure spending bill any time soon.

As one of our colleagues, a sincere and lifelong transportation advocate, put it, "the transportation community is mostly talking to itself and living in denial about the changing political mood." That mood—in the nation at large as well as in the next Congress— is unmistakably becoming more conservative and skeptical of big government. An overwhelming 70 percent of Americans think the government does not spend taxpayers' money wisely, according to a recent Rasmussen poll. Newly elected members of Congress will be marching to the drum of fiscal discipline and looking for ways to curb out-of-control spending, a GOP aide told us. Congress will be closely questioning costly new federal initiatives no matter how well intentioned, he added. The expansive federal-aid surface transportation program as we have known it in the past may no longer be thought politically acceptable or fiscally affordable.

And who knows, the new mood of fiscal restraint may even infect the White House. As one senior White House adviser, quoted in the Sunday Times Magazine story, put it, "there's going to be very little incentive for big things over the next two years unless there's some sort of crisis." And we doubt that by this he meant "infrastructure crisis."

###

Please feel free to forward or reprint this item with appropriate citation. All correspondence, including requests to subscribe and unsubscribe, should be addressed to: C. Kenneth Orski, Editor/Publisher; email: [korski@verizon.net](mailto:korski@verizon.net); tel: ; fax: 301.299.4425. Please make sure that your email account is set up to accept incoming mail from [korski@verizon.net](mailto:korski@verizon.net)