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Improving our nation's transportation bill of health

Our nation's transportation arteries – its highways, railways, airways and waterways – are suffering from years of neglect. Their ability to carry the goods and services we depend on – our life's blood as a nation – has been obstructed. Everything from cars and coal to food and furniture comes to us through our transportation arteries.

The impact of these deteriorating systems reaches far beyond our borders as American businesses rely on these vital pathways to ship their manufactured goods across the country for export around the world.

But regardless of our dependence on them, we have failed to maintain their health. Below are just a few of the harsh realities of getting this system up to speed.

- \$186 billion in federal spending is what the American Society of Civil Engineers says will be required annually to substantially improve our roads – far less than the current combined federal and state spending of \$70.3 billion per year for highway capital improvements. And every year we continue to underinvest in our system, the gap grows larger.
- A \$1.2 trillion industry is at stake, according to a recent report from the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. The problem goes beyond the delivery of goods and services as the transportation industry generates 8 percent of the nation's jobs and supports industries that make up 84 percent of the economy. It's important for Americans to realize this as we look for ways to emerge from the worst economic downturn since the Great Depression.

- A multimodal strategy will play a critical role in improving our freight transportation networks, lowering our consumption of fuel and improving our environment. And while we take baby steps, our global competitors are racing ahead. We invest less than 1 percent of the value of our gross domestic product in infrastructure, compared with China's 9 percent.

A healthy and efficient transportation system is vital to our global competitiveness. American productivity, which fuels our higher standard of living, cannot be sustained with a deteriorating transportation network.

The facts reported in the AASHTO study are chilling. For example, between 1980 and 2006, traffic on the Interstate Highway System grew by 150 percent, while interstate capacity grew by only 15 percent.

AASHTO estimates that 10 years from now an additional 1.8 million trucks will be rolling down our highways. In 20 years, one truck will be added for every two today, a 50 percent increase, pushed by a rising population's increased demand for food, clothing and other goods shipped by truck.

On average, 10,500 trucks a day travel busy sections of the Interstate Highway System. But by 2035 this will increase to 22,700 trucks, with some segments seeing 50,000 trucks a day. If 2035 seems like a long time in the future, realize that 1985 is a similar 25 years ago. An analysis of the 10 worst U.S. interchange bottlenecks revealed that each causes more than a million hours of truck delays per year, wasting \$19 billion and driving up consumer costs.

Our railroads also are under increasing strain; their freight load is expected to climb by 38 percent between now and 2035. We will need to invest \$135 billion in freight rail infrastructure during the next three decades to keep pace with demand, according to the Association of American Railroads.

Meantime, more than half of the 240 waterway locks funded by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are at least 50 years old.

A few policymakers understand what is at stake. In 2010, our nation's railroads, highways and ports received \$1.5 billion from the U.S. Department of Transportation's Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery program.

However, that investment was a drop in the bucket compared with the 1,400 applications that sought more than \$60 billion in TIGER funds.

Clearly, we must do much more to meet our freight capacity needs. With our economic future hanging in the balance, we must formulate a bold, decisive action plan to rejuvenate our freight networks in a multimodal fashion. Given that resources are limited, our action plan should include:

- Restoring our critical highway corridors to their preeminence. We must add capacity to the interstate highway system to meet the coming increase in freight traffic, and separate freight and passenger traffic where possible. Our strategy should include dedicated truck lanes, a national network of truck-only highways and targeted investments to unclog the worst highway bottlenecks.
- Expand freight rail capacity and utility. Increasing intermodal shipments, investment tax credits and public-private investments will help us reach that goal.
- Continue improving and modernizing our air traffic infrastructure to prepare for growth in freight air traffic. This includes implementation of the satellite-based Next Generation Air Transportation System, which will increase both capacity and safety.
- The federal government must lead the way in funding and establishing policies to add freight capacity, maximize safety, conserve fuel, protect the environment and reduce or remove regulatory barriers to improved performance. Congress should provide funding for Critical Commerce Corridors, a 25-year initiative to fund projects of national significance. With funding from freight-related user fees separate from the Highway Trust Fund, this program would enable states to fix highway truck bottlenecks, improve intermodal access to ports and distribution centers, fund international gateways and add capacity to priority trade corridors.

By addressing our transportation challenges through workable planning, prioritizing and funding solutions, we can generate jobs and bolster our economy as we boost our mobility. HNTB is working hand-in-hand with clients to explore how multiple funding options – including private financing of transportation projects, the implementation of new technologies and project delivery methods, commercialization of public infrastructure and tolling – can work together to fund improvements.

Delays will only increase costs and the deterioration of our infrastructure. These problems need to be fixed now, starting with the old thinking and obsolete regulations that got us where we are today.

We are making progress. A bill introduced in the Senate in July 2010 calls for a national multimodal freight transportation plan. The bill would create a competitive grant program for freight-specific port, freight rail and highway projects.

We must allow the innovative spirit of our industry to flourish by electing leaders who share a positive vision for our country's infrastructure, understand the urgency and are willing to take the lead. Transportation leaders must work together with them to inform the public and gain the support of the American people. Now is the time to pool our experience, resources and energies to develop a long-term, well-funded, sustainable transportation plan.

Prior to serving as HNTB national transportation practice group leader, Rahn was executive director of the Missouri Department of Transportation and the New Mexico Department of Transportation. He also is a past president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, an organization that represents all state DOTs.

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