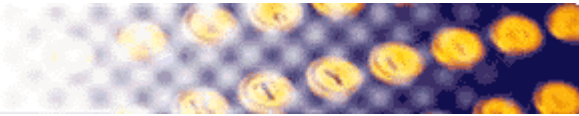




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Friday 6 March, 2009

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## Time to rethink transportation

By ALEX NELSON

January 29, 2009

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### President Barack Obama recently proposed a massive federal infrastructure plan that he likened to the New Deal and President Dwight Eisenhower's historic initiative to create the interstate highway system.

At a time when roads and bridges across the country are crumbling and public transportation systems are straining to keep up with booming demand, President Obama and others are right to recognize the need for investment that will increase our quality of life as well as create good jobs. But it is critically important how infrastructure money gets spent. While the economy struggles, it becomes even more important to ensure that we are making investments that will benefit our state and country in the long term.

Congress should not assume that more transportation means better transportation. It does not. America's transportation system isn't just broke; it's also broken. In fact, transportation contributes to many of America's most pressing problems. Consider: Each year Americans waste billions of dollars and millions of hours stuck in traffic - a problem that is often made worse by construction of new highways.

As driving has increased over the decades, transportation has become the second biggest expense for the average household - costing even more than health care and just behind housing.

Our transportation system is the chief source of our nation's addiction to oil, consuming two out of every three barrels, and leaving America vulnerable to volatile prices and hostile foreign regimes.

Cars and trucks are major contributors to air pollution. In dense urban areas and along truck routes, these emissions degrade air quality and constitute a public health hazard. We will not succeed in reducing emissions unless we provide Americans with alternative ways to reduce the number of miles they drive.

Finally, too many transportation projects like Alaska's infamous "Bridge to Nowhere" have been embarrassing boondoggles that erode confidence in government and divert dollars from more productive uses.

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Not every dollar spent for infrastructure is equally good for the public interest. Yet state departments of transportation are eagerly offering lists of favored projects, which include hundreds of millions in proposed spending for more of the same types of wasteful highway construction projects that got us where we are today.

Congress must commit to spend money for results and not simply inject dollars into the economy. The need for a major overhaul of our national transportation system is almost universally recognized because the current system just does not make sense. The federal government currently collects gas taxes from the states and then pumps those dollars back based on outdated formulas forged by political compromises that had nothing to do with achieving national goals. We cannot afford to continue to pour buckets of money into that same broken machine.



How should the federal government spend transportation money? It should be spent on projects that advance long-term goals, such as reducing our dependence on oil, curbing air pollution, repairing aging highways and bridges, alleviating congestion and improving safety.

To reach these goals, emphasis should be placed on expanding light rail, commuter rail, rapid bus service, high-speed intracity rail and other forms of modern public transportation. At least as much money should be allocated to these transportation choices as to roads and highways.

The new administration and Congress have a tremendous opportunity to help turn the economy around by putting millions of people to work rebuilding and reshaping our transportation systems. Wise spending could help us meet many of America's most important challenges while setting the country on the path to a better, more sustainable 21st century transportation system.

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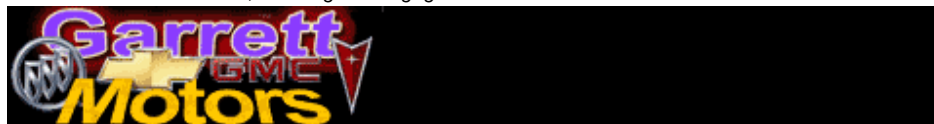
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