



Convert old LPs, tapes and photos to digital! [Shop](#)

Great Gifts!

ION™ LP-to-MP3 Turntable

Digital Media Converters

Brooks



Commentary

Let's Stimulate Smart Highways

Gabriel Roth 02.23.09, 5:30 PM ET

The "stimulus" legislation just signed into law by President Obama includes billions of dollars for transportation and infrastructure, with little regard as to whether the projects meet any serious national or regional need other than supposedly creating or "saving" jobs.

Like other goods and services in a market economy, transportation and infrastructure projects should respond to the public's willingness to pay, not to politicians' eagerness to spend. If the Obama administration really wants "change," as it claims, it should change the way transportation projects are selected and financed, emphasizing market-based approaches. A good place to start would be with the \$27.5 billion the stimulus bill proposes spending on highway, bridge and road projects.

If Washington insists on spending more on highways, it should at least spend it intelligently, rather than throwing it willy-nilly at projects politicians have declared "shovel-ready."

An example of smart spending would be urban networks of "high-occupancy or toll" (HOT) expressways that accomplish specific objectives, such as increasing accessibility and reducing congestion and air pollution.

"HOT Networks," first recommended in 2003 in a Reason Foundation study by Robert Poole and Ken Orski, are networks of limited-access express lanes open to buses and specific types of high-occupancy vehicles (such as van-pools) for free, and to other vehicles for a toll. Payments are collected electronically and voluntarily from customers' pre-paid accounts, with payment levels varying during the day.

On California State Route 91, east of Los Angeles, which pioneered the concept of HOT lanes in 1995 along a 10-mile stretch of median, tolls now vary from \$1.25 at midnight to \$9.55 on Thursday afternoons. Drivers from all income classes use the toll lanes, with 10% more women than men switching from the existing lanes. Those who choose not to pay stay on the non-toll lanes.

HOT lanes have many advantages. They offer buses and van-pools speedy, congestion-free travel at no charge. Those who choose to pay get premium service and save time. Even drivers who choose not to use the express lanes benefit from reduced congestion, as the toll lanes siphon off some of the traffic. Moreover, the fees collected cover most of the costs.

The success of California's SR-91 express lanes has prompted Denver, Houston, Minneapolis, Salt Lake City, San Diego and Seattle to convert high-occupancy vehicle (HOV) carpool lanes to HOT lanes. Similar lanes are being added to Washington's Capital Beltway.

Poole and Orski sketched out plans for HOT networks in Atlanta, Dallas/Fort-Worth, Houston, Los Angeles, Miami, San Francisco, Seattle and the Washington, D.C., area. Their fully implemented plan could cost more than \$50 billion, more than the \$40.2 billion allocated to transportation projects in the misguided stimulus bill. But at least HOT lanes would offer several advantages over business-as-usual spending.

First, they would help reduce the economic drain traffic congestion causes in urban areas. Former Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta, for example, estimated in 2006 that these costs amounted to \$200 billion a year.

For more on this topic, see:

[Martin Sosnoff On Infrastructure Spending](#)

[Jim Powell On The Old New Deal](#)

[Susan Lee On Public Versus Private Infrastructure Spending](#)

HOT networks also would reduce air pollution, stimulate job creation by improving mobility, provide cities with congestion-free networks for use in emergencies and, unlike most government spending initiatives, help pay for themselves out of toll revenues.

Several states already are converting existing lanes to HOT lanes, requiring no major new construction, but bringing almost immediate benefits from reduced congestion. Such conversions are under way in Atlanta (I-85), Los Angeles (on I-10 and I-110), Miami (I-95 Express Lanes) and San Francisco (I-680).

Few public-sector programs are more in need of change than transportation, with its chronic congestion problems, "bridges to nowhere" and investments responsive to political preferences rather than to those who travel or move goods.

HOT highways would help solve several problems at once. If the White House and Congress want to improve transportation infrastructure, this is where they should start.

Gabriel Roth is a research fellow at The Independent Institute, Oakland, Calif., and the editor of the book, STREET SMART: Competition, Entrepreneurship and the Future of Roads, published by the Independent Institute and Transaction Publishers.