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## LaHood: On the Road to Sell Stimulus — Still

By Adriel Bettelheim, CQ Staff

Congress enacted the economic stimulus package in mid-February. But it seems that Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) has never stopped selling it.

As custodian of the huge pot of infrastructure spending in the \$787 billion initiative (PL 111-5), LaHood, more than other members of President Obama's Cabinet, is responsible for demonstrating that the stimulus is delivering on the administration's promises to create jobs and lay the foundation for a sustained economic recovery.



It's a job that increasingly places the most high-profile Republican in the administration at odds with his own party.

Republican groups are stepping up criticism of Obama's recovery efforts, pointing to [still-rising unemployment rates](#) as evidence that the stimulus is not doing much to create jobs.

The [National Republican Congressional Committee](#) and state GOP organizations have begun targeting freshman House Democrats from swing districts who voted for the spending package, contending that the lawmakers accomplished little except to saddle debt on future generations of Americans.

"Why can't Kilroy admit that she made a mistake in supporting this wasteful spending bill?" the NRCC said in one such broadside fired at Ohio's [Mary Jo Kilroy](#). Other first-term House Democrats on the Republicans' list include [Mark Schauer](#) and [Gary Peters](#) of Michigan and [Eric Massa](#) of New York.

The rhetoric increasingly puts the onus on LaHood, 63, to demonstrate results. He's responding by crisscrossing the country, promoting road

projects, light rail and port development while urging voters to be patient.

"I've been around politics for 30 years. I know the economy will be the issue in the next election," LaHood said in an interview. "Many of these projects are just getting started. We've got two construction cycles between now and the 2010 election. Thousands of people are already working, and millions of dollars have gone out the door. Every major highway has orange cones up with signs showing recovery dollars are being spent. What's the other option? Do nothing?"

LaHood was recruited for the Cabinet largely on the basis of his personal friendship with White House Chief of Staff [Rahm Emanuel](#) and his reputation for getting along with lawmakers from both parties, not because he has an extensive background in transportation.

While he occasionally seemed out of step with the hard-charging conservatives he caucused with in the House, LaHood often was a reliable team player, and a front man for his party's needs.

Last week found him serving in a similar capacity for the Democratic White House. LaHood first flew to Denver to help break ground on a stimulus-funded renovated road and bike path, then continued on to Portland, Ore., where he promoted a locally-built street car and cited the city light rail network — the recipient of more than \$53 million in stimulus money — as a model of urban planning.

There were later stops scheduled in the week for Oakland, Calif., and Nevada to discuss stimulus opportunities for ports and high-speed rail.

Transportation secretaries have long engaged in this sort of retail politicking, often with a veneer of nonpartisanship. But stimulus spending is another story, both because the package was enacted with virtually no Republican support in Congress, and because so much of the new spending was predicated on moving quickly to rebuild crumbling bridges and roads.

LaHood said his department already has obligated \$20.5 billion of stimulus funding, covering some 5,740 projects across the country. The sum distributed to states includes \$16.1 billion of highway spending, \$2.2 billion of federal transit grants and nearly \$1.1 billion for airport improvement projects.

But already, there is grumbling in some circles about the kind of projects that states are opting to target.

[Smart Growth America](#), a coalition of national and local groups, issued a June 29 report that concluded states have chosen to spend too much building new roads when more funds should have been allocated to repairing old ones and to mass transit. The report cited research showing road and bridge repair generates 16 percent more jobs than new construction.

Beyond debates over the merit of some projects, conservative pundits are assailing LaHood for advocating the use of zoning laws and mass transit funding to curb automobile use and influence where people live. A focus of these criticisms is a "livable communities" initiative LaHood is promoting with other Cabinet departments, built around the notion that affordable housing can be built near public transportation, neighborhood street blocks can be shortened to promote walking and bus routes can be expanded to reach more areas.

"LaHood is a Republican, for Pete's sake, the party [before it lost its bearings] of 'No, we can't' and 'Actually, we shouldn't' and 'Not so fast' and 'Let's think this through,'" [columnist George Will wrote](#) in a May column. "Now he is in full 'Yes we can!' mode. Et tu, Ray?"

LaHood, who drives a 1998 Buick Regal when he's in Washington, seems nonplussed by the criticism, saying he doesn't want to micromanage states' ability to select which projects they want to fund.

He professed some irritation with unnamed former Republican colleagues in Congress he says rushed to take credit for new federal spending in their districts, then condemned the Obama administration for running up deficits and throwing good money after bad.

"As Americans, we should be praying the president does well," LaHood said. "If his economic plan succeeds, America will do well, our friends and neighbors will do well. There will always be other elections, but we should be hoping this plan works."

Charles H. Franklin, a political scientist at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said the stimulus could yet haunt swing district Democrats if unemployment continues to rise well into next year.

But he says voters are likely to view the spending package in the context of broader administration efforts to revive the economy that include bailing out ailing automakers, propping up homeowners struggling to make mortgage payments and overhauling the U.S. health system.

"These raise more lasting political cleavages in swing districts," Franklin said. "It's an issue of failing to cure the economy rather than the stimulus itself."

Though he isn't afraid to publicly shame detractors, LaHood still is relying on candor and personal friendships to win GOP support for other Obama initiatives. He actively worked the phones to firm up eight House Republican votes for the [just-passed energy bill](#)(HR 2454) and predicts more Republicans will warm to Obama's efforts to retool health care.

"Bipartisanship isn't a slogan with the president. It's about getting the very best people to work with him," LaHood said. "When he thinks people can be helpful, he'll reach out."

As for the stimulus debate, LaHood predicts his role will remain that of an honest broker who can work both sides of the aisle.

"My motivation is to look at where the money is going, ensure there's a mixed use of the funds, identify opportunities and make sure it's being spent correctly, by the book," he said.

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