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Politicians, transportation experts seek billions for highways, railroads

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Would spending billions putting engineers and construction crews to work rebuilding the nation's aging infrastructure keep America out of a recession?

A group of leading governors, transportation experts and House Democrats say it's worth trying, with Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell and others arguing Tuesday that the federal government should immediately spend billions on U.S. highways, bridges and rail systems.

"We can't wait for this to be discussed next summer," Mr. Rendell said Tuesday. "Congress and the president-elect must undertake major investments in our infrastructure."

Mr. Rendell and others called for a two-pronged approach to transportation: more spending now, with an eye toward adding jobs for construction workers, engineers and others, and a much more expensive plan that would involve rethinking transportation.

Tuesday's announcement by the governors comes just a day after House Speaker Nancy Pelosi took similar steps.

Second bailout

On Monday, she ordered House committee leaders to begin hearings on a so-called second bailout plan and promised a renewed push for tens of billions of dollars in new spending on infrastructure.

The House passed a \$61 billion stimulus package earlier this year, but it did not pass the Senate. With the nation either already in or fast headed toward a recession, Ms. Pelosi said Monday she will try again and this time include even more transportation spending.

"The benefit of the thinking that we've had in the week since we passed that [\$700 billion] recovery package is that another recovery package is needed," Ms. Pelosi said Monday. "It may have to be larger than the one we passed in the House in light of the events that have transpired since."

Will it work?

Some experts say increased government spending on infrastructure is unlikely to improve the U.S. economy or prevent a recession.

"The short answer is no," said professor Mike Davis of the Cox School of Business at Southern

Methodist University, when asked if billions in new spending on highways would shore up the economy. "The most obvious reason is that these projects take a long time to get up to speed, to identify the needs, to get the contracts in place and to have the actual money spent."

Both presidential candidates have called for billion-dollar rescue plans for the economy, though they disagree over the role transportation spending should play.

Sen. Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, has called for immediately spending \$25 billion on improving the nation's infrastructure, money that would be targeted to new highways, rail lines and meeting the system's growing maintenance needs.

Sen. John McCain, the GOP nominee, supports a \$52.5 billion stimulus package, but his focus is on reducing taxes rather than spending more money on highway projects. His campaign declined an interview request Tuesday but issued a position paper that reiterates his opposition to funding earmarked transportation projects.