

The Washington Post

Failing U.S. transportation system will imperil prosperity, report finds

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Monday, October 4, 2010; 6:20 PM

The United States is saddled with a rapidly decaying and woefully underfunded transportation system that will undermine its status in the global economy unless Congress and the public embrace innovative reforms, a [bipartisan](#) panel of experts concludes in a report released Monday.

U.S. investment in preservation and development of transportation infrastructure lags so far behind that of China, Russia and European nations that it will lead to "a steady erosion of the social and economic foundations for American prosperity in the long run."

That is a central conclusion in a report issued on behalf of about 80 transportation experts who met for three days in [September 2009 at the University of Virginia](#). Few of their conclusions were groundbreaking, but the weight of their credentials lends gravity to their findings.

Co-chaired by two former secretaries of transportation - [Norman Y. Mineta](#) and Samuel K. Skinner - the group estimated that an additional \$134 billion to \$262 billion must be spent per year through 2035 to rebuild and improve roads, rail systems and air transportation.

"We're going to have bridges collapse. We're going to have earthquakes. We need somebody to grab the issue and run with it, whether it be in Congress or the White House," Mineta said Monday during a news conference at the [Rayburn House Office Building](#).

The key to salvation is developing new long-term funding sources to replace the waning revenue from federal and state gas taxes that largely paid for the construction and expansion of the highway system in the 1950s and 1960s, the report said.

"Infrastructure is important, but it's not getting the face time with the American people," Skinner said. "We've got to look at this as an investment, not an expense."

A major increase in the federal gas tax, which has remained unchanged since it was bumped to 18.4 cents per gallon in 1993, might be the most politically palatable way to boost revenue in the short term, the report said, but over the long run, [Americans should expect to pay for each mile they drive](#).

"A fee of just one penny per mile would equal the revenue currently collected by the fuel tax; a fee of two cents per mile would generate the revenue necessary to support an appropriate level of investment

over the long term," the report said.

Fuel tax revenue, [including state taxes](#) that range from 8 cents in Alaska to 46.6 cents in California, have declined as fuel efficiency has increased. [President Obama](#) mandated that new cars get 35.5 miles on average per gallon by 2016, and government officials said last week that they are [considering raising the average to 62 miles per gallon by 2025](#).

Facing [midterm elections](#) in November, Congress has lacked the will to tackle transportation funding. Efforts to advance a new six-year federal transportation plan stalled on Capitol Hill after the previous one expired last year.

If Congress were to do the report's bidding, the task would be far broader in scope than simply coming up with trillions of dollars in long-term funding to rebuild a 50-year-old highway system.

The experts also advocated the adoption of a distinct capital spending plan for transportation, empowering state and local governments with authority to make choices now dictated from the federal level, continued development of [high-speed rail systems](#) better integrated with freight rail transportation, and expansion of intermodal policies rather than reliance on highways alone to move goods and people.

But Mineta noted that 42 days after [an eight-lane bridge collapsed into the Mississippi River in Minneapolis](#) in 2007, a survey found that 53 percent of respondents opposed an emergency gas tax increase to pay for infrastructure repairs.

"The shelf life of a tragedy like [I-35W] was 42 days," he said. [Thirteen people died in the collapse and more than 100 were injured](#).

The report emphasized that federal policy should be crafted to address congestion by providing incentives that encourage land use that reduces single-occupant commutes and promotes "liveable communities."

"Creating communities conducive to walking and alternate modes of transportation . . . should be an important goal of transportation policy at all levels of government," the report said.

It also encouraged expansion of innovative public-private partnerships to further transportation goals, citing the [high-occupancy toll lane project](#) in Northern Virginia as an example.

"The one option that's not in this report is throwing up our hands," said Jeff Shane, a former Transportation Department official and a member of the panel. "That seems to be the option that Congress chooses."

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