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Guest on THE INFRA BLOG

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America's Increasing Reliance on the Rural Economy

The nation is increasingly reliant on its rural economy, particularly as a major source of energy, food, and fiber and as that dynamic is changing we wanted to take a look at the nation's transportation system, and see if we have in place a rural transportation system that can support not only the rural economy, but the nation's economy moving forward. What the report points out is really that the nature of our economy is changing, and as we see a significant increase in agricultural production and particularly in energy production—both new sources of energy or new types of getting energy, whether it's through fracking, it's natural gas, it's getting oil from new techniques or also increased importance of renewable energy—these are putting a tremendous new stress on our rural transportation system. So it's obviously important to people living in rural America, which is still a significant part of the nation's population, but really, we are all very reliant on the rural economy and its transportation system.

Why We Need Better Rural Roads: Traffic Fatalities and Durability

There are three significant areas of concern for our rural transportation system. The first is traffic safety; the rate of traffic fatalities on our rural roads is nearly triple on all other roads and that's a huge concern. Approximately half of the nation's fatalities are occurring on rural roads even though they carry significantly less in terms of the share of overall travel. So that's a huge challenge that needs to be faced. The other is that we're seeing conditions on pavement and also on bridges deteriorate in rural areas, and to a large extent this is a function of not adequately investing in this system but starting to see a significant increase in truck travel on these rural roads due to increased agricultural and also energy extraction. While this is absolutely critical to the economy and the increase in trucking reflects that, these roads were never built to sustain that type of traffic load and volumes, and so states are really starting to recognize that they need to start to improve these roads, not only to make them safer, but also to allow them to accommodate this growing economic boom and do it in a way that the roads and bridges still stay in good condition.

Congress Needs to Approve Long-Term Funding

A significant challenge being faced in the rural transportation system starts with federal funding for surface transportation, largely for road and bridge improvement and really over the last decade those actual amounts have stayed relatively even, which in real terms means that their buying power is actually going down. This summer the federal program expires at the end of September and the funds in that program are running so low that by next month the federal government might actually start to hold back on some

of that funding. So Congress right now is deliberating a short-term extension just to keep the program going, but really what's needed is a long-term federal program with adequate funding to start to address some of these challenges so that states and local governments can start with a basis of a strong federal program that they can rely on. But then as you pointed out, there are still significant challenges in terms of state and local resources going to support local roads.

Our Responsibility to Increase Public Support for Transportation Investment

There does seem to be a disconnect between the public's desire to have a well-maintained transportation system, a reliable transportation system, and then, most critically, a transportation—particularly a road and highway—system that is as safe as possible for the type of roadway they're driving on. And I think as the public begins to learn that the reality is that if basic and cost-effective safety improvements are made and they are significantly safer they're going to support those improvements. And I think also they recognize that a lot of the potential for economic growth in their communities, whether they're rural areas or areas that the rural economy helps support them, and they start to see the connection between adequate investment in the transportation system and economic growth, again then they're more supportive and that is really the challenge of the transportation community: to build that public support for keeping the system in good condition, keeping it reliable and keeping it safe, so that that can then translate to the political will to put in place at the local, state and federal level the resources that are necessary for making those improvements.

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