

Believe again

BY BRIAN DEERY

Projects ready to go, but confidence needs to be restored

Discussions about a stimulus package with funding for “shovel-ready” public works projects to help jumpstart the economy has focused new attention

on the role infrastructure investment plays in our economy—both at the state level and nationally. President-elect Barack Obama understands that infrastructure investment can have immediate benefits throughout the economy.

This notion is supported by a comprehensive economic study just released by the Associated General Contractors of America. The study measures, on a state-by-state basis, how investing in infrastructure will create jobs, increase earnings and stimulate economic growth. For example, it concluded that personal earnings will increase nationwide by \$1.1 billion while the national gross domestic product will increase by \$3.4 billion for every billion dollars invested in new infrastructure projects.

An equally important consideration is that investing in transportation infrastructure will give the U.S. a global competitive edge for decades to come. Congress has an opportunity to take the needed steps to improve our economy and America’s quality of life both in the short and long term. Authorization for the federal-aid highway program and the federal transit program expires on Sept. 30, 2009, and Congress and the administration must take action.

It’s no secret that the nation’s transportation system needs help. Our bridges and roadways are aging, crumbling and congested, yet the Highway Trust Fund is running on empty.

As they work to complete the next surface authorization, the next Congress and administration will have to find the right mix of user fees, tolling, freight-related fees, private financing, a planned infrastructure bank, bonding and other revenue sources to continue investing in infrastructure after the stimulus expires.

But generating that new revenue will be difficult, because Americans have lost confidence in the value of

investing in transportation infrastructure. Thanks to earmarks, wasteful spending and growing traffic, that pride has been replaced with frustration and even anger.


Today Americans do not want to invest in transportation because they have no confidence that money will be spent on the kind of projects that matter.

So the first and most pressing challenge facing the construction industry, Congress and the incoming administration will be to earn back investor confidence in our transportation system. Collectively, we must show Americans that their money is being

spent wisely on projects that will make commuting easier, shipping more efficient and the air cleaner.

We have to show Americans that their transportation dollars will not sit idle while vital projects are stymied under endless red tape and protracted environmental reviews. We have to find ways to cut years off the 13-year average time span it now takes to get a new road, runway or airport built in this country.

We have to show Americans their money is paying for concrete and steel, instead of consultants’ reports and lawyers’ bills. And we have to show them that we can build projects where and when they are needed, instead of where and when they are convenient.

We have to get the public’s support the old-fashioned way—we have to earn it. 

Congress has an opportunity to take the needed steps to improve our economy and America’s quality of life both in the short and long term. We need to earn back investor confidence in our transportation system.

Deery is senior director of the Highway & Transportation Division for the Associated General Contractors of America.