

## LaWho?



**BY BILL WILSON**  
Editorial Director  
bwilson@sgcmail.com

### New secretary of transportation loaded with unknowns

I go by the name of Hansel in my neck of the woods.

Devour me if you must, for I am just a tasty temptation in this dark and demented Land of Lincoln.

I should know how to get to the house of new Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood. I mean, the man is right here in the state of Illinois (please take a few moments to rekindle the latest Gov. Rod Blagojevich joke in

your head). He is a mere day trip away, a light jaunt down I-74 to the underrated city of Peoria.

Instead I feel totally lost as I venture out in an attempt to familiarize myself with the new leader. For all I know, I could mistake him for a witch. That is, if the stray sticks of this wooded jungle do not poke my eyes out first.

Those in the road- and bridge-building industry appear to be in a safe place with LaHood. Shortly after he was introduced as the new head of all things transportation, every e-mail that found a temporary resting place in my inbox carried the same reflection. All applauded the selection, citing LaHood's experience and his ability to mix the red and blue party colors into a powerful purple.

In the meantime, I still could not come up with a thought if it was planted right in front of my face. So I just swung the shovel downward and kept digging. That is when my search hit a rock, an ugly rock. According to some, LaHood is not a witch but a spending demon. The *Wall Street Journal* went as far as to blame his massive dollar flinging as one of the reasons his fellow Republicans lost control of Congress in 2006. Apparently his earmarking behavior is pierced with diamond studs. In FY 2008, LaHood secured \$62.7 million in earmarks for his Peoria district, which ranked him in the upper 10% of pork distributors in the House.

The man also has shallow roots in the transportation

sector. His brief stint on the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee was covered in inactivity. In contrast, the last three heads—Rodney Slater, Norm Mineta and Mary Peters—all carried heavy transportation baggage. Some parcels were good, some were bad, but they knew how to shoulder the load.

I am starting to see the trees through the forest, and my concerns are the size of redwoods. One of the first things to come out of LaHood's mouth upon accepting the secretary position was almost a plea to correct the rail situation in this country. I believe Amtrak and light-rail transit deserve more attention, but not if it takes food away from the road and bridge sector.

Our readers shook the same amount of salt over the decision to go with LaHood. When asked in our weekly website poll if President Obama made the right choice for transportation secretary, 56% said someone else should have been selected for the job. Only 20% thought the move was right on. I was expecting fireworks from this announcement, and all I got were those tiny snaps that come in a tiny box. And most of those are duds.

Some say the sole reason why President Obama named LaHood was to land another Republican in his hyped Cabinet. It appears this man of Illinois is going to put his face on money rather than be the face of the industry. That might pass in the beginning, but I certainly would not want to taste-test anything coming from his kitchen in the long term. **FW**

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