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Investing in infrastructure matters

By Kelly J. Brough and Ed Rendell

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How much thought do you give to infrastructure? If you are like most, we don't give it a second thought until something goes wrong — a bridge collapses, the electric grid fails, or a water main bursts. The recent floods have brought this reality home to Coloradans as our friends and neighbors struggle to recover from one of the worst natural disasters in our history.

For too long, America has been living off of the infrastructure investments that were made by previous generations. Not only is our infrastructure growing older, it is also experiencing increasing wear and tear as our population skyrockets and people are commuting further and for longer time frames. And, investments in infrastructure have not kept pace with the demands of our 21st century economy.

According to the Transportation Regional Incentive Program, vehicle travel on America's highways has increased by 37 percent from 1990 to 2010, while newly constructed road mileage increased by only 4 percent. During this same time, the nation's population grew by 25 percent. In Colorado, the population has grown by 57 percent between 1990 and 2012 and vehicle traffic has increased by 71 percent.

Statistics like those give insight into those challenging commutes we can face. Those delays are costing you more than time; they also are costing you money. Nationwide, traffic congestion costs American drivers \$121 billion in wasted time and fuel. In Colorado, that equates to \$913 per motorist.

Gridlocked and deteriorating road conditions also drive up the prices of goods as trucks are stuck on the same congested roads. Freight bottlenecks and other congestion cost about \$200 billion a year and 1.6 percent of U.S. economic output. America's under-maintained roads, bridges, water systems, levees, dams and other infrastructure have earned a grade of D+ from the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Building America's Future, the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce and the American Society of Civil Engineers will co-host a policy forum on Oct. 24 to discuss how a long-term plan of smart infrastructure investments will grow the economy and enhance the nation's economic competitiveness. This forum couldn't come at a better time.

While Washington has been consumed by partisan bickering, more and more states have stepped up and are implementing innovative solutions to meet infrastructure-funding challenges. This year alone, governors in four states — Wyoming, Virginia, Vermont and Maryland — have signed legislation to increase transportation revenues in 2013. The success rate for local ballot

initiatives in 2012 seeking to raise revenue through bond measures or a sales tax was 79 percent. This unprecedented success demonstrates that the public is willing to pay for specific projects when it is clear what the benefits will be.

Colorado has been a leader when it comes to creative financing options to ensure that critical projects are built. For example, efforts to partner with the private sector for the T-REX and FasTracks projects have served as models for other communities and regions around the country.

But states and the private sector alone cannot solve the nation's considerable infrastructure challenges. It is time for Washington to update the nation's transportation policy with a long-term plan that will require clear criteria for funding, encourage state and local innovation through competitive incentives, get projects built faster, and ensure they stay on budget and deliver the promised results.

The nation's current transportation funding law will expire in less than one year. Nothing less than our economic competitiveness and quality of life is at stake.

Kelly Brough is president and CEO of the Denver Metro Chamber of Commerce. Ed Rendell is the former governor of Pennsylvania and co-chair of Building America's Future. To register for the forum, go to <http://www.denverchamber.org/infrastructure>.