



## **We need courage, vision to build for America's future**

By Ray LaHood - 02/06/14

It wasn't that long ago that the economic competitiveness of America's transportation and infrastructure systems was ranked first in the world.

Now, the French are beating us when it comes to the quality of our roads. Barbados can brag that it has a better aviation system. And the ports in Bahrain win hands down over ours.

Just nine years ago, we were No. 1 in the world. Today, we are ranked 15th. Our Highway Trust Fund is about to run out of money and the law governing surface transportation programs is about to expire. It is past time for action.

When I served as President Obama's Transportation secretary, I saw firsthand the state of our nation's roads, rails, runways and aviation system — the good, the bad and the ugly. I was proud of the work we did at the Department of Transportation to use stimulus dollars to quickly put our friends and neighbors back to work repairing roads and bridges.

Our Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery (TIGER) grant program was so wildly successful that Congress just voted to fund it again so that local municipalities can compete for support of local projects.

But here's the ugly truth: Only two ports on the East Coast are deep enough to receive the enormous vessels from Asia that will become standard once the newly widened Panama Canal opens in 2015.

When it comes to air travel, our skies are approaching gridlock and our World War II-era air traffic control system can't keep pace with the demand. By 2022, the volume of air passengers is expected to increase by 50 percent, but our cars now use more sophisticated GPS technology than the ground-based radar our aviation system still relies on.

Our roads are essentially one big pothole, and tens of thousands of bridges that millions of Americans drive across every day are in dire need of repair. And because our passenger rail network is riddled with chokepoints, outdated grade crossings and bridges that require slow speeds for safety, passenger trains in the U.S. run slower today than they did 50 years ago.

These challenges are immense but not impossible. What will it take to modernize America's transportation infrastructure and keep us economically competitive? I believe that it's going to take courage and vision: vision to devise a long-term strategic plan that is based on measurable economic results, and courage to make the hard choices necessary when it comes to paying the bill.

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill could learn some valuable lessons about how to get this done from their colleagues in statehouses and city halls across America. Governors and mayors have been watching the gridlock in Congress with growing alarm. They are concerned that the level of funding they have traditionally received from Washington has been shrinking — with no plan to reverse course. As a result, many of them have made the hard choice to raise revenue themselves, either

through fuel taxes or sales taxes. The public has also endorsed many of these efforts by consistently approving ballot measures to increase investment in transportation. The success rate has soared — 91 percent of all ballot initiatives in this past November's election passed.

Governors and mayors have also used the private sector to leverage their dollars, and as a result, more than 30 states have passed laws to authorize partnerships with the private sector. The Port of Baltimore is a great example of a successful public-private partnership. The state of Maryland partnered with Highstar, an infrastructure investment fund, and now it's one of just two ports on the East Coast ready to welcome the super-sized vessels that will be coming through the newly expanded Panama Canal.

But don't misunderstand — these local and statewide efforts should not replace the federal government's responsibility here. Without an overriding national vision and network, America's transportation infrastructure would resemble a patchwork of disconnected roads and rails, our aviation system would be untenable and moving goods across the country would be a nightmare. The only way to maintain and upgrade a well-functioning American infrastructure and transportation system is for federal leaders to show courage and have a vision for national priorities.

One thing Congress should consider is raising the gas tax by 10 cents a gallon and indexing it to inflation. That would provide the kind of breathing room needed to get our roads and rails back on track.

In my new role as co-chairman of Building America's Future, I look forward to working with my fellow co-chairmen, former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell and former New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg. Together we will visit communities across the country to talk with public officials and the business community and learn how they are collaborating to solve their area's transportation challenges. In Washington, we want to work with all sides — Republicans and Democrats — to craft a national vision and a long-term infrastructure plan that will make the necessary strategic investments so that our great nation remains economically competitive.

Our nation's policymakers have an opportunity to work together to do great things to put America back on top. All they need is courage and vision. I hope they have what it takes.

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*LaHood served as the secretary of Transportation from 2009 to 2013. A Republican, he represented Illinois's 18th Congressional District from 1995 to 2009. He is a co-chairman of Building America's Future.*