

Building the America we yearn for



'We must reverse decades of failing and worsening national infrastructure,' the authors write.
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By ED RENDELL & SLADE GORTON | 4/28/11

Infrastructure is about the quality of life we want for ourselves, our families and our communities.

You may not hear the electricity whizzing through power lines – but it's there and we count on it every time we flick on the light switch. It's the 300 ports, the 600,000 bridges and the 117,000 miles of rail that enable goods to move throughout the country. It's the 79,000 dams that protect our communities and provide much of our power, and the 55,000 community drinking water systems that provide us with safe water.

A vibrant infrastructure provides us with the reliability that we all expect in modern life.

Yet, for far too long, our nation has under-invested in its infrastructure. When our bridges, levees and electric grids fail, the consequences can be catastrophic, affecting millions. New Orleans is still recovering, nearly six years after its levees failed after Hurricane Katrina; 13 people died when the I-35W Bridge collapsed in Minneapolis in 2007, and much of the Northeast and parts of the Midwest and Canada came to a standstill during the blackout of 2003.

Our infrastructure hasn't even kept pace with our national growth in the last few decades. Countless studies have documented this sobering news. U.S. infrastructure was given a D grade

by the American Society of Civil Engineers. Yet policymakers show little sense of urgency that smart new investments are needed.

If the United States is to remain economically competitive with the rest of the world, we must reverse decades of failing and worsening national infrastructure with visionary and robust strategies.

But the growing concern over our nation's soaring budget deficits — coupled with too many in Washington who equate investment in infrastructure with earmarked spending — has led many to argue that this is the wrong time to increase true infrastructure investment. They could not be more mistaken.

A frank conversation about our infrastructure needs should recognize that this debate is occurring in the context of stark choices about how to return the country to a sustainable fiscal path. With the dominant economic focus now on reducing public spending, a new conversation about increased investment in public infrastructure is needed. This conversation must include how to pay for the estimated trillions of dollars of needed investments and how to assure real returns.

We believe it is time to change the nature of the conversation about infrastructure. We cannot afford to let the current impasse persist.

That is why we are sitting down with like-minded executives and officials from business, labor, state and local governments, the environmental community, first responders, realtors and others at an infrastructure vision summit in Washington on Thursday and Friday.

Our goal is to engage traditional and non-traditional stakeholders in developing a path to a robust national infrastructure, consistent with the need to restore the nation's fiscal health.

Our nation stands at a seminal moment. We can either invest wisely and strategically in our future; or we can avoid the necessary reforms to our national policies. We need to make the essential investments that offer the tangible returns to our economic growth and competitiveness, enhanced safety and security and an improved quality of life.

But we also cannot ignore the need to pay for these investments. Nor can we ignore the fact that smart infrastructure investments can bring short-term job creation as well as longer term economic growth and recovery.

Now is the time for this hard work to begin and for hard choices to be made.

Ed Rendell is the former Democratic governor of Pennsylvania and co-chairman of Building America's Future Educational Fund. Slade Gorton is a former Republican senator from Washington and co-chairman of the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Transportation Policy Project. They are speaking at the conference, "Changing the Conversation: Advancing a National Infrastructure Improvement Agenda" on Thursday and Friday.