



Rebuilding our economic backbone

By Ed Rendell
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We're getting beat by Estonia.

Not that there's anything wrong with the tiny state on the Baltic Sea. But the nation that built the Hoover Dam, pioneered the Interstate Highway System and created the best aviation system in the world, is rapidly sliding toward the bottom of the list when it comes to infrastructure.

Infrastructure is the economic backbone of any modern society. Without a reliable, functioning system, things we take for granted would fall apart: roads and bridges, schools, public and private transportation, the energy grid that powers our lives, the water we drink. But today the United States no longer leads the world in infrastructure competitiveness. Countries like the Netherlands, South Korea and Singapore now rank in the top 10, according to the World Economic Forum, while the United States, once No. 1, has fallen to 14.

If this does not concern you, it should.

Building America's Future, a national and bipartisan coalition of state and local elected officials that I co-chair with New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg and former California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, recently updated [*Falling Apart and Falling Behind*](#), a comprehensive report on the state of America's infrastructure.

What's the bottom line? Our legacy of advancement and innovation – the very things that made the United States an economic superpower – is at risk. Global competitors are racing ahead. They're doing it by making smart, long-term investments in modern networks, such as rail, ports and electrical grids, to meet the demands of the global economy.

A case in point is the investment in port infrastructure made by our competitors in anticipation of larger vessels becoming the norm once the newly widened Panama Canal is completed. Since 2000, China has invested more than \$5 trillion in its ports. Brazil has invested more than \$250 billion since 2008.

The result? China now has six of the world's busiest ports and the U.S. has none of the top 10. Shanghai's port now moves more container traffic in a year than the top eight U.S. ports combined. Brazil's investment has gone into its Acu Superport, larger than the island of Manhattan, with state-of-the-art highway, pipeline and conveyor-belt capacity to ease the transfer of raw materials onto ships heading to China.

And the United States? The World Economic Forum ranks us 19th in the quality of our port infrastructure, behind such countries as Iceland, Denmark and – yes – Estonia.

Our roads are not much better – with expensive consequences for every American. Americans spent 4.8 billion hours sitting in traffic in 2010, wasting 1.9 billion gallons of fuel at a cost of \$101 billion. Since 1980, the number of cars and trucks on U.S. highways has increased by 104 percent, but the miles of new highway lanes have grown by only 4 percent.

The growing congestion of our railway system, moreover, plagues our freight corridors, choking economic growth and development throughout every region of our country. In Chicago, home to our nation's largest rail center, [congestion is so bad](#) that it takes a freight train longer to get through the city limits than it does to reach Los Angeles.

This and other freight corridors are clogged and inadequate to support growth. As a result, the World Economic Forum ranks the U.S. No. 18 in rail system quality – behind Finland and Malaysia.

To regain our status as a world leader, we must develop a national infrastructure strategy for the next decade. Working together, Washington must:

- Produce a 10-year critical infrastructure plan that makes significant new investments;
- Pass a long-term transportation bill;
- Target federal dollars toward economically strategic freight gateways and corridors;
- Refocus investment on projects of national significance.

It is time to create a National Infrastructure Bank that would leverage financing from the federal, state, local and private sectors. This could provide funding for critical projects that cross jurisdictions and affect multiple sectors such as roads, water and energy.

Our nation's leaders must think big and act boldly. Policy must be based on economics, not politics. Rebuilding and modernizing U.S. infrastructure must be a priority if we want to remain economically competitive with the rest of the world. When we do so, we will give a significant boost to our economy and create tens of thousands of well-paying jobs.

We can either make smart, strategic investments or we can sit back and watch the world pass us by.

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