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Infrastructure investment boosts U.S. economy, competitiveness

Infrastructure is America's economic backbone

By Ed Rendell and Frank Ortis

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From highways and bridges to ports and aviation, infrastructure is the economic backbone of America that allows commerce to flow and keeps our quality of life high.

However, the United States has not kept pace with our growing infrastructure needs. And when it comes to transportation policy, we are still following an agenda set more than 50 years ago when Dwight Eisenhower was president.

As proof, we need to look no further than right here in Florida, where much of the infrastructure is outdated, underfunded and badly in need of repairs and modernizations. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, nearly one in five of Florida's bridges is structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, needlessly putting our families and commuters in harm's way.

Many of our state's road networks are so jammed with traffic that drivers in Jacksonville, Miami and Orlando annually waste more than 200 million hours and nearly 150 million gallons of fuel sitting in traffic. All of this adds up to a \$3.8 billion hit to the state's economy.

The story is much the same around the rest of the country: We are living off of investments made several generations ago, and we have not reinvested in the systems needed to ensure that future generations can compete in a global market. This short-sightedness is wasting taxpayer money and time and slowing down the efficient movement of goods around the nation. For example, congestion is so bad in Chicago rail yards that it takes a freight train longer to get across the city than it does to get from Chicago to Los Angeles.

Building America's Future Educational Fund, a national and bipartisan coalition of state and local elected officials, of which we are members, recently released "Falling Apart and Falling Behind." The report lays out the economic challenges posed by our nation's ailing infrastructure, provides a comparative look at the smart investments being made by our international competitors, and suggests a series of recommendations for crafting new, innovative transportation policies.

Our global economic competitors get it. At a time when budgets around the world are being slashed, our competitors are wisely continuing to make robust, cutting-edge transportation infrastructure investments. And those decisions are reaping a variety of benefits for their citizens and economies.

Since 2000, China has invested \$3.3 trillion in infrastructure projects. They now have six of the world's top 10 ports, while the United States has none. Shanghai's port now moves more container traffic a year than the top seven U.S. ports combined. The European Union invested over \$578 billion to create a single, multi-modal network to integrate land, water and air transport networks throughout the EU. And Brazil is developing a \$19.7 billion, 223-mph high-speed rail line between Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, which is expected to be running by 2014.

Economists, academics and, indeed, many of our global competitors, all seem to agree: Infrastructure is an investment in our country's future that will create jobs and economic prosperity. What seems to be missing in the United States is the political will from the federal government.

Instead of educating constituents on the economic and job-creating benefits of infrastructure investment, some members of Congress offer a knee-jerk reaction to any new spending. What they fail to understand is that to get our nation's economy back on track, we must develop a new, long-term vision for making the type of strategic investments that are based on economics — not politics.

They must embrace such innovative and viable financing options such as creating a National Infrastructure Bank and allowing greater state and local innovations such as congestion pricing. Congress needs to pass a six-year transportation bill and invest more in mass transit, the Next Generation air traffic control system and true high-speed rail.

It's a big job, but America is up to the task. It's time we got started.

Ed Rendell is a former governor of Pennsylvania. Frank Ortis is mayor of Pembroke Pines. They are members of Building America's Future. To view their report, "Falling Apart and Behind," go to <http://www.BAFuture.org/Report>.