

THE HILL



May 22, 2014

Turbulence ahead

By Ed Rendell and Roger Dow

Delayed flights. Congested highways. Trains that crawl instead of speeding to their destinations. These hassles and annoyances are standard practice when it comes to travel in America. These are not just anecdotes – recent studies have shown evidence that gridlock is the new normal.

The infrastructure research firm Cambridge Systematics found that within the next decade, 25 of the nation's top 30 airports will suffer the same congestion as the day before Thanksgiving at least two days each week. In other words, the busiest travel day of the year will be what passengers visiting many of America's top destinations will experience every day.

The news isn't any more encouraging for those traveling our nation's highways.

According to another study, several major American corridors will be as jammed on a typical day as they are on Labor Day. Researchers project that Labor Day-like traffic could be an everyday reality on I-95 between Palm Beach and Melbourne, Florida as soon as 2020 and between New York and Washington within the next ten years.

The U.S Travel Association and Building America's Future are releasing a survey today of the nation's top travel industry leaders that finds that our nation's failing transportation infrastructure is crippling economic growth.

According to our survey, more than three-quarters of travel industry leaders say the current state of our transportation infrastructure puts the U.S. at a competitive disadvantage compared to other countries when it comes to attracting visitors. More than a quarter of respondents call it a "strong disadvantage."

Attracting international visitors would unquestionably be good for our economy. But the business community questions whether the country would be equipped to handle the arrival of the millions of new visitors who could be coming. Fully 78 percent of travel industry leaders believe our infrastructure cannot meet the competitive demands of increased international and domestic travel over the next 10 to 15 years.

These survey results come at a critical time. The Highway Trust Fund - which provides the federal funding for the nation's roads, bridges and transit systems - is on track to go broke

as early as this August. Nearly 600,000 jobs and tens of thousands of businesses depend on the projects that Trust Fund investments make possible—to say nothing of the broader impact on hotels, restaurants, national and theme parks, and dozens of other kinds of businesses that rely on their customers' ability to efficiently get from place to place.

Investing in America's transportation infrastructure was once a shared priority for both Republicans and Democrats. Somehow, our elected leaders have lost the appetite for action. Despite the pressing national need to improve our travel infrastructure, Washington has been AWOL when it comes to making even modest new investments.

The transportation infrastructure challenge has grown so dire that businesses that once steered clear of the Washington debate are jumping in, calling for renewed federal leadership.

A wide range of business leaders from the \$2 trillion travel industry – including hotels, rental cars, theme parks and local convention and visitors bureaus – are getting calling for change. The goal is to bring a fresh perspective to the stale Washington debate and to achieve a truly seamless system that will allow travelers to easily move from roads to rail to airports. But to achieve such a system, which would be a huge boon for our economy, some estimate we will need \$3.6 trillion in new investment by 2020.

The private sector is not just lobbying: it is ready to invest. According to a study by several major financial institutions, an estimated \$250 billion in private capital is available for infrastructure investment.

And voters, the people living with congestion on the roads and overcrowded airports, are demanding progress too. Last November, voters across the country approved almost 30 local ballot initiatives providing more than \$700 million in funding for highways, bridges and transit.

With the private sector and voters hungry for change, the stage is set for a bipartisan breakthrough on infrastructure. Voters are ready to embrace smart and strategic infrastructure investments and will stand behind political leaders who put the nation's good ahead of partisan advantage. Private capital is available to leverage public funds. All that's missing is the political will to get the job done.

Rendell is the former governor of Pennsylvania, former mayor of Philadelphia and a current co-chair of Building America's Future. Dow is the president and CEO of the U.S. Travel Association.