The race to fortify our nation's infrastructure

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Will Congress get a bill across the finish line, or will cities and states continue it alone?

The nation's infrastructure—what I've called the bones of our economy—is foundational to a strong and sustainable America.

But our infrastructure is in big trouble. It's been neglected and ignored for far too long. It's not just the 70,000 bridges that have been classified as "structurally deficient." It's cracked roads, a fragmented grid and overwhelmed water systems. Or consider our schools. We need more than $270 billion to repair our aging schools, and more than $500 billion to modernize them for the 21st century, according to the distressing State of Our Schools report USGBC released earlier this year.

All in all, we could lose more than 3.5 million jobs and suppress GDP by $3.1 trillion by 2020 if we don't adequately invest in our infrastructure, according to a report by the American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE).

Since getting into office, President Obama has recognized the need to rebuild and reinvest in America. Sticking with the "bones" metaphor, he understands that we desperately need to put calcium in the bones. In February, during his State of the Union (SOTU) address, the president announced a $50 billion "fix it first" proposal to repair our crumbling infrastructure, which would, as he said, "Upgrade what our businesses need most: modern ports to move our goods, modern pipelines to withstand a storm, modern schools worthy of our children."

A month later, ASCE again underscored the urgency for this investment when it issued its Infrastructure Report Card. Our country's grade was a dismal D+ across all 16 sectors of our infrastructure (see the blog post by my colleague Nathaniel Allen, who attended the report's launch). Even more frightening, based on existing funding trends, ASCE found that we're facing a $1.6 trillion infrastructure investment gap.

Since Obama's SOTU, lawmakers have responded with a bevy of legislation introduced to help jump-start our much-needed nation building at home. Most notably, last week, Sen. Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) and Sen. John Hoeven (R-N.D.), leading a bipartisan group of lawmakers, introduced a bill that would help states invest $50 billion in the revitalization of our transportation infrastructure. The bill would create Transportation and Regional Infrastructure Project (TRIP) bonds to allow states to issue up to a total of $50 billion: $1 billion per state. The House companion bill is being led by Rep. Edward Whitfield (R-Ky.) and Rep. Allyson Schwartz (D-Pa.).

Rep. John Delaney (D-Md.), who's been at this for a while, introduced legislation (H.R. 2084) in May designed to unleash private financing for large-scale infrastructure projects. The former CEO's bill, the Partnership to Build America Act, leverages federal loans and loan guarantees to help states and municipalities finance as much as $750 billion toward transportation and infrastructure programs with no appropriated federal funds. The bill has 30 co-sponsors, half Democrats and half Republicans. Also last week, Rep. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) advanced a bill that would establish a government-owned corporation to fund infrastructure improvement projects. And in the Senate, Jay Rockefeller (D-W.Va.) and Rand Paul (R-Ky.) both have introduced bills.

But the big question is, can the country wait for federal action?

States and cities don't seem to think so. In light of a polarized and paralyzed Congress, states and localities have looked for opportunities to create their own mechanisms to help get infrastructure projects off the ground.

In Chicago, Mayor Rahm Emanuel began what may be the most innovative municipal effort ever designed to take on infrastructure challenges. In March, he launched the Chicago Infrastructure Trust, which will leverage $1.7 billion to support infrastructure investments. Waiting for Washington wasn't part of his plan. "The day we announced [the trust], Congress passed the ninth extension of the Highway Bill from 2005 for 90 days. I cannot tie the city's economic vitality, its future, its viability, to that dysfunction," Emanuel said during the CGI America conference last month.

Other mayors are looking into creating similar models. And, in lieu of national policy, some mayors are talking about linking their city-based infrastructure banks to form a de facto national infrastructure bank.

States are already joining hands to tackle a massive need for repairing and improving infrastructure.

Last year at Greenbuild, Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber launched the West Coast Infrastructure Exchange, a collaboration among Oregon, California, Washington and British Columbia that will create innovative new methods to better leverage limited public financing with greater private investment and expertise. "In this region alone, we are looking at probably the need for $1 trillion of infrastructure investment over the next 30 years," Kitzhaber said during the press conference in San Francisco.

In April of last year, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo led the creation of a $15 billion state infrastructure bank, dubbed "New York Works," to support everything from bridges to roads to municipal water systems.

And last month, with ICLEI, the World Wildlife Fund and the National League of Cities, we launched the Resilient Communities for America campaign. One of the pillars of the campaign is to help communities identify and implement new infrastructure financing opportunities.

Clearly, the race for infrastructure is on. It's a big win for all of us when cities, states or the feds get these innovative policies across the finish line.

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Paul Lilley
Vice President, TRANSWESTERN
2 years 8 weeks ago

I could not agree with you more. Utility companies are in desperate need of funding and our bills are going to go through the roof without it. I just interviewed one utility company in So Call and their infrastructure is well over 60 years old.

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