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Is Transpo Funding Fundamentally a PR Problem? Five Ex-DOT Chiefs Discuss

Posted By [Tanya Snyder](#) On December 2, 2011 @ 11:47 am In [Bike/Ped,Federal Stimulus,Gas Tax,High-speed rail,Jobs,Transportation Enhancements,U.S. DOT](#) | [2 Comments](#)

How can you convince Americans that transportation is important enough to invest in?

That's the question that brought together five former U.S. Transportation Secretaries this week at the University of Virginia's Miller Center.



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Former DOT Chief James Burnley took a swipe at Transportation Enhancements and the stimulus.

James Burnley was deputy secretary and then secretary under President Reagan. He took the position that "75 percent" of the public "gives the thumbs down to paying more for transportation" because we're giving them the wrong argument about why it matters. He took a jab at President Obama's stimulus program:

We have to stop treating transportation infrastructure as a short-term jobs program. It didn't work by any conventional definition of what "working" means. We all knew –those of us who have expertise in the field – it would not work in terms of short-term stimulus.

Because it takes time – it takes years for that money to actually be spent and people to be hired. We need to convince the American people that we need to invest in transportation infrastructure because we need to invest in transportation infrastructure. If we sell that idea – not as a jobs program, but because it affects the ability of our economy to grow over time, our international competitiveness and all the other things that we believe it affects, then we've got a fighting shot at convincing the American people that the resources that we believe ought to be devoted to transportation should be devoted to it.

That's a legitimate point, and [Streetsblog has made the same argument](#) ^[2] – that selling transportation as a jobs program undersells the true value of transportation. But there are a few problems with what Burnley is saying. First, when asked to tax themselves at the local or state level for transportation improvements, 75 percent of voters say *yes*. So maybe the case isn't so hard to make after all.

And second, most Republicans – and many Democrats – fault the stimulus for not investing enough in infrastructure. Not quite seven percent of the package was devoted to infrastructure, and many critics say that's why the stimulus didn't do more to create jobs. Certainly, the president's desire for "shovel-ready" projects may have been naive, which Obama himself has [publicly admitted](#) ^[3]. But Burnley may have been over-simplifying things with his statement.

Meanwhile, Sam Skinner, who served under President George H.W. Bush, argued that too many bridges to nowhere have eroded public confidence. And it's not just transportation, he said – government mishandling of Medicare and pensions and everything else leads to overall distrust that the government can handle anything at all, despite the fact that the transportation department has proven that it "actually can complete projects under budget and on time."

He said the reputation of the transportation program is "still suffering from the residue of a couple projects that got out of control" – most notably, Boston's Big Dig, whose price tag grew from \$3 billion to \$19 billion. (The final price tag was actually \$14.6 billion, or \$22 billion if you account for interest.) Skinner said the government risks losing the public's confidence again with high-speed rail: After all, the cost of California's new rail line has gone from "\$20 billion" (fact check: it was more like \$43 billion) to "\$90 billion" (actually \$98.5 billion) – "without a single shovel being put in the ground."

"You cannot have high-profile projects with runaway costs without undercutting American confidence in the ability of government to do it," Skinner said.



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Rodney Slater, DOT Chief under Clinton, said Enhancement projects are some of the most popular around.

Rodney Slater was President Clinton's second-term transportation secretary. He said his job was made easier by the fact that he had "just wonderful legislation" to work with (ISTEA and TEA-21) "and the dollars as well." But he also said it was a different time.

"I always had a wonderful time working with Republicans and Democrats," Slater said. "I can't think of a bad experience. Only recently that we've gotten to a point where that is not something that you can expect." He did point out that the EPW committee did manage to turn around the recent trend of bitter, divided partisanship, "and you cannot have two more distinct titans than Barbara Boxer and Jim Inhofe."

Still, he said, when he came in to office, "people were as skeptical about government as they are now." He said getting the public sector to be a good partner to the private sector – and labor to be a good partner to management, as well as Republicans to be a good partner to Democrats – was key.

He also exhorted transportation officials to “hit the road” to explain to people in different localities how the federal transportation program can be a partner to them in realizing their projects. He said that although some people wanted to reverse some of ISTEA’s good policies when it came time to craft TEA-21, those policies had proven themselves. “Because of the good we could demonstrate, we were able to hold the line.”

And Slater put in a good word for an active transportation program the Republicans are [currently determined to do away with](#) ^[5]:

During that period, not only did we raise the gasoline tax, but we also built upon ISTEA with TEA-21. We have some enhancements there – that’s a small amount of money. But I’ll tell you, if you go to see some of those projects dedicated, the crowd that’s there is the same as for those multibillion dollar projects. Those crowds are the same.

Burnley had taken a different line on these programs. “If you’re building trolley museums instead of repairing bridges, you should not be surprised if people become cynical over time,” he said.

Mary Peters, who served as USDOT chief for much of President George W. Bush’s second term, agreed with Burnley, not Slater.

What destroyed the confidence people had in the transportation system? If you ask Peters, it was a bunch of things like “bicycle trails and historic covered bridges” (read: [Transportation Enhancements](#) ^[6]) that are “nice-to-do” things when you have the luxury. Right now, she said, during a time of tight budgets, we don’t have that luxury. “We have to now cut back to the very core highway and transit programs that these bills are supposed to fund,” she said. She added that she’d put high-speed passenger rail in the “nice-to-do” category.

She said there would have been no need for an urgent conversation about how to convince Americans of the need for transportation investment during the interstate era, “when there was a compelling national purpose.”

People didn’t mind “incremental raises in the gas tax” to pay for interstates, Peters said, “even though the money didn’t come from one state and go back to that state” – a common complaint among states that [see themselves](#) ^[7] as “donor” states, paying more in gas taxes than they get back in federal funding.

Peters also noted the need to look at alternatives to the gas tax, which she said was being weakened more and more by improved fuel efficiency standards. “The gas tax is not sustainable, it is not reliable, and it is not going to get us into the future,” she said.

During her time in office, Peters was an advocate of privatizing transportation infrastructure, partly because of her prescient concern about the declining Highway Trust Fund.

Finally, Norm Mineta spoke. Mineta, like Ray LaHood, is a crossover, serving in an administration of the opposite party. (He was a Democrat serving in George W. Bush’s Cabinet.) His comment came less in the form of advice on how to frame the message, and more a lament about where things are.

“Transportation is something everyone takes for granted until it’s denied them,” Mineta said. “And when it’s denied them, it has a shelf life of 45 days.” He was referring to the tragic bridge collapse in Minneapolis in 2007. Two days after the collapse, Rep. Jim Oberstar (D-MN), then-chair of the House Transportation Committee, urged the passage of a five-cent emergency bridge tax. “The bridge went down Wednesday,” Mineta said. “He talked about that Friday. And by Tuesday, Jim was already backpedaling from the five-cent emergency gas tax idea, and 45 days later, USA Today had a survey about the five-cent emergency gas tax idea and 57 percent said ‘No, we don’t need it.’ So I figure the shelf life is a tragedy is 45 days.”

And yet, he said, transportation is something everything is dependent on, to move around and to get goods on the shelves.

There are a few messaging points I’d like to add that none of the five secretaries mentioned.

First, a superficial one: Surveys show that people don't know that the gas tax has stayed the same since 1993, not indexed to inflation or the price of gas. They think the gas tax is going up every time the price of gas does. So, it could just be a matter of wording. Instead of asking about "raising" the gas tax, you could ask simply about indexing it to inflation or the price of gas. Or you could ask about ways to stop the decline of transportation funding. You could mention that it is no longer a winnable proposition to count on gas-guzzling to fund our infrastructure needs.

Second, it's true that more money for transportation isn't always a good thing. Skinner talked about the Big Dig and bridges to nowhere, but to that I'd add endless highway expansions with no plans for maintenance and no accommodations for alternate modes. I'd add a highway system built on sprawl and disconnected from smart land use planning. None of the secretaries mentioned that a well-functioning transportation system won't be built on formula funding but on a strategic process of setting national and regional goals and actually building transportation infrastructure that meets those goals. Will that cost more money than we spend today? Less money? The same? It remains to be seen. But however much it costs, it might be easier to gather public support for raising that amount if the transportation spending decisions are based on projected benefits, and not just asphalt for asphalt's sake.

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URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/burnley.jpg>

[2] Streetsblog has made the same argument: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/2011/07/01/the-dangers-of-touting-the-job-creation-benefits-of-transpo-investment/>

[3] publicly admitted: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/2011/09/07/behind-obama%E2%80%99s-call-for-more-infrastructure-projects/>

[4] Image: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/slater.jpg>

[5] currently determined to do away with: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/2011/11/01/bikeped-funding-safe-as-senate-rejects-rand-pauls-amendment/>

[6] Transportation Enhancements: http://www.enhancements.org/Te_basics.asp

[7] see themselves: <http://dc.streetsblog.org/2011/10/12/new-gao-report-all-states-are-donees-when-it-comes-to-highways/>

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