



Monday, May 2, 2011

## Do We Need More Highways?

By [Fawn Johnson](#)

Correspondent, National Journal

The U.S. Conference of Mayors will unveil the results of a survey this week showing that the country's mayors are big fans of transit, and perhaps less so of new highways. The survey will show that most mayors want highway expansion to be a low priority when investing in infrastructure. A majority of mayors also oppose a gas tax increase--the preferred revenue-raising option of the transportation and business communities--unless the money from those taxes goes only to support maintenance of existing roads and bridges and expanded transit like rail, buses, and other public transit. They would oppose a gas tax increase if it were directed at highway expansion.

The gas-tax conversation is theoretical right now, with both President Obama and congressional Republicans on record opposing it. But the mayors' perspective speaks to a broader debate that will bubble up when policymakers start crafting a new surface-transportation bill--where should infrastructure investment go? New highway construction is lucrative and sexy, and thus easier to win political support for it. Road maintenance, by contrast, is boring. Public-transit investments can also cause difficulties because they set up disputes between urban and rural areas.

Are the mayors right that the United States doesn't need anymore new highways? If they are wrong, where should new highway construction take place? If they are right, how should infrastructure spending be allotted among public transit projects and road and bridge maintenance? Does it make sense to devote any gas tax funds to public transportation?

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**11 Responses**

May 5, 2011 10:26 AM



## Highways Yes, Transit Yes

By Patrick J. Natale, P.E.

P.E., Executive Director, American Society of Civil Engineers

It is understandable that the nation's mayors would place a lower priority on building new roads. Local budgets have been severely squeezed over the last couple of years and it is becoming increasingly difficult just to maintain the existing roads and transit systems. Building new roads just looks unattainable at the moment. Further, as urban density increases, it is obvious that we need to move people more efficiently and need more capacity on our transit systems.

Despite these facts, one-size-fits-all funding and policy paradigms will not address the diverse range of problems facing transportation infrastructure in all regions of the country. We need flexible, sustainable solutions that meet the needs of different populations, environments and geographies, and regional economies. In many cities that answer is definitely shoring up existing assets and expanding transit. In other areas it might mean new highway capacity and in many areas it would be a mix of both. And in many communities, it's a mix that also includes non-structural alternatives such as telecommuting, riding sharing, and bicycles. Mayors have long asked for more local input over how infrastructure money is spent -- something counter to their call for new restrictions.

The nation's mayors are some of the most visible political leaders to most citizens; they should be working to educate their constituents about the long term benefits and value of investing in infrastructure. ASCE stands ready to help make that happen.

May 4, 2011 6:27 PM



## Who decides what's "sexy"?

By [Laura Barrett](#)

Since when are road builders and Congresspeople who like groundbreakings the only ones who get to decide what's "sexy"? Road maintenance is far from boring for the tens of millions of Americans who drive every day on pothole-filled roads in cities like Detroit, St. Louis, and Milwaukee. Driving on deteriorating roads is dangerous, frustrating, and takes an extra toll on struggling families through wear and tear on cars.

Fixing existing infrastructure also makes economic sense, as a [variety of voices](#) argued in this forum two weeks back. Highway repair creates more jobs than new highway construction, as shown in our 2008 report [The Road to Good Jobs](#).

Public transit is incredibly sexy to many of Americans—especially the younger generation, who are less interested in car ownership than ever before. The number of people aged 20-24 who are licensed to drive actually [declined by five percent](#) between 1994 and 2008. People under 30 are more likely to prefer "pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use communities in both urban and suburban settings" according to a recent [report](#) by the Urban Land Institute. Any community that wants to attract young, creative, energetic, entrepreneurial young people—which means any community concerned with its economic future—should take note.

And it's not just young people. In recent years, transit ridership levels have hit 50-year peaks despite the floundering economy. From 1995 through 2009, while the number of young licensed drivers was dropping, public transportation ridership [increased](#) by 31%. And in yet another sign of the broad appeal of public transit investments, six cities in Michigan and Ohio overwhelmingly approved transit funding ballot initiatives that were up for vote on May 3:

**Benzie County, MI—WIN, 75%-25%**

Renewal and Restoration of a 0.5 mill property to support Benzie Bus

**Holland, MI—WIN, 76%-24%**

Renewal of a 0.4 mill property tax to support operations of the Macatawa Area Express bus system

**Grand Rapids, MI—WIN, 50.2%-49.8%**

A 0.35 mill property tax increase to expand bus service across The Rapid system

**Grand Haven Township, MI—WIN, 59%-41%**

A 0.95 mill property tax increase for Harbor Transit and road/bridge investment

**Kalkaska County, MI—WIN, 72%-28%**

Renewal of a five-year, 0.25-mill levy for the county's public transit authority.

**Stark County, OH—WIN, 66%-34%**

Renewal of a 0.25 percent sales tax for Stark Area Regional Transit Authority bus service

Nothing's more attractive than a community with a thriving economy; safe, well-maintained roads and bridges; and a transit system that connects people to jobs, education, health care, and opportunity. There's no groundbreaking in the world that beats that.

May 4, 2011 5:55 PM



## Mayors' Priorities or Natl. Priorities?

By Greg Cohen

President and CEO, American Highway Users Alliance

The mayors' report may accurately reflect the parochial concerns of its constituency. But the Congress and the Obama Administration should be primarily interested in federal priorities. Chief among these should be improving the flow interstate commerce, promoting national economic growth, and halting the epidemic of highway fatalities.

From the broader national perspective, new highways, redundant routes, and expanded highway capacity are essential for the country's economic growth. Perhaps this is less the case in those cities where the local street network is largely built-out and interstate traffic is unwelcome. Yet in growing cities that are facing severe congestion ahead, businesses are relocating out-of-town to escape the traffic that politicians seem to do so little about. In addition, most growth is in suburban areas, and most commerce is moving through rural areas, where new roads and road capacity are critical to increasing opportunities and operating a just-in-time logistics chain. That is why Congress needs to think more broadly than most mayors and resist the temptation to spread what little money is available to those who want it for small, local projects with little national significance.

Highway users still pay for the vast majority of the surface transportation program and we expect a strong return on our investment. Several groups representing motorists and truckers have stuck out their necks to support higher taxes on ourselves in exchange for better roads. Although about 98% of all person-miles-traveled are on the highways, we've also been willing to provide a significant share of our money to other modes. But there are limits.

We are not even slightly surprised that others want to take the money from motorists and truckers – but the responsible thing for Congress to do is to show some leadership and say NO to local politicians interested in using federal money for projects that do not serve the federal interest.

Instead, Congress should continue to invest highway user fees in the manageable, formula-driven, state-administered, federally-aided transportation programs and reform them to achieve tough, new performance standards.

May 4, 2011 10:49 AM



## The Need for a Flexible Program

By Robert L. Darbelnet

President and CEO, AAA

If the question is ‘do we need more highways?’ the short answer is ‘yes.’ If the question is ‘are the Mayors correct in supporting transit at the exclusion of highway improvements and capacity?’ the short answer is ‘no’ -- even though transit may be a good solution for their city’s needs.

AAA is on the record as being open to the idea of increased gas taxes to pay for a better system. In some cases, a “better system” is one with new capacity, be it a lane, highway, bridge, transit system, etc. While it’s famously said that we cannot build our way out of congestion, we also can’t strictly manage our way out of it either. Infrastructure investment should go to the most pressing needs in accordance with achieving measurable travel and safety improvements for customers. These solutions will not be the same in every city, or even be the same priority of local, state and federal policymakers. We need a program that is flexible, and balanced enough so that all parties can work together in a productive fashion to improve the system.

The Mayors have it right that the public is largely unaware of the life-cycle costs that go along with maintaining the nation’s aging highway and transit systems. There are no one-time purchases involved here. Bridges eventually have to be resurfaced and rebuilt, bus fleets need to be upgraded, and innovative technologies have to be retro-fitted into existing systems to make them safer and more efficient.

We agree with the 96% of Mayors who feel that the federal government needs to invest more in transportation infrastructure to reverse decades of underinvestment. And we agree with the Mayors and many of the other blog contributors that a good portion of additional investment must go to maintaining what we’ve already got. Writing a bill that achieves the right policy balance – that provides flexibility to build new capacity where it

makes sense and ties it all back to greater performance that consumers will actually feel – is the big challenge for Congress.

May 3, 2011 3:42 PM



## Look In, Not Out

By Douglas R. Waggoner

Chief Executive Officer of Echo Global Logistics

When it comes to highway infrastructure investment, governments on the Federal, State and City level should focus their attention not on the inter-city/state roadways, which overall are in good condition, but rather on developing strategies to ease congestion in and around the country's largest cities.

Every day, commuters and truckers driving into big cities lose hours of productivity sitting in traffic –and when you factor in the exhaust produced by idling vehicles, especially large trucks, it is doing terrible damage to the environment as well.

Over my career in the trucking industry, one of the biggest hurdles trucking firms face in maintaining profit margins is getting in, around and out of the country's largest cities as efficiently as possible, a Herculean task given the sheer volume on the roads inside any of the country's largest cities. In fact, many trucking firms won't allow their drivers to deliver goods inside certain cities, such as New York, instead relying on companies with fleets of small trucks to get the goods to their final destination. Moving goods into and out of cities is crucial to our national economy, and congestion on the roads inside these cities costs shippers, and in turn, their customers, a lot of money.

Therefore, cities need to start thinking strategically about how to ease congestion on their internal roadways. Whether it is developing more efficient mass transit systems to carry people in and out of cities, or taxing vehicles to drive inside the city limits, such as they do in a number of European cities, the governments of our country's largest cities need to start making progress on slashing the numbers of vehicles clogging their roadways.

In the early 1980's, the Southern California Association of Governments, concerned about the inability of large trucks to move goods efficiently from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to downtown Los Angeles, developed the idea for the construction of what was to become the Alameda Corridor. The Alameda Corridor is essentially a 20 mile long rail line that directly links the ports with downtown,

eliminating the need for large trucks to journey back and forth between the ports and the city, reducing congestion on the Freeways circling Los Angeles and significantly increasing efficiency and productivity for shipping and trucking companies. The railways that make up the corridor carry an average of 40 trains every day, equaling more than 11,000 TEUs (Twenty Foot Equivalent). It is widely recognized that the Corridor is one of the most successful infrastructure projects undertaken in a U.S. city over the last 30 years.

Today, when thinking about how to best maximize the existing roadways serving a given city, government leaders would be best served to develop plans aimed not at accommodating more vehicles, but rather plans aimed at how to best eliminate vehicles from their roads. Pair this with a strategic investment in managing how goods move in and out of the city, and you have a winning combination.

**May 3, 2011 11:06 AM**



## **New Highways Should Not Be A Priority**

By Phineas Baxandall

Senior Analyst, United States Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG)

The issue is not whether our highways systems require investment but whether we can afford to neglect maintenance and repair of existing roads and bridges while diverting such large federal sums to new and wider highways. Like the U.S. Conference of Mayors, U.S. PIRG agrees that, especially in this time of scarce resources, federal highway expansion should not be a priority.

The majority of major roadways in urban areas – where 80 percent of Americans live and work – are determined by engineers to be in less than good shape. An unacceptable 11.5 percent of America's highway bridges are structurally deficient.

The poor state of our roads and bridges is no accident. Political forces often undermine a strong commitment to maintenance: Members of Congress, state legislators and local politicians thrive on ribbon-cuttings while they can often defer repairs that won't garner political recognition. Outside contractors exert additional pressure by lobbying for new construction projects rather than routine repair and maintenance which are generally done in-house.

To fix our roads and bridges, America first must fix our transportation policies. While there will always be some new highway capacity worth prioritizing, federal funders should demand proof that states are not neglecting existing infrastructure and have established mechanisms to fund the future costs. Such policies already exist for transit New Starts. We must adopt strong "fix-it first" rules that give priority to maintenance of our existing roads and bridges, set national goals for the condition of our transportation system, and hold state governments accountable for achieving results.

*For more on the need for "fix-it-first" policies, see last year's [Road Work Ahead: Holding Government Accountable for Fixing America's Crumbling Roads and Bridges](#).*

**May 3, 2011 10:52 AM**



## **No More "Free" Highways**

By [Joshua Schank](#)

President and CEO, Eno Transportation Foundation

The Mayors are absolutely right that highway expansion should be a low priority - because highways as we have traditionally built them in this country have been perceived as free of charge. 80% of Mayors feel this way most likely because in 80% of cities, it would be a gross misallocation of public resources to invest in brand new "free" highways. In many urban cores, highways can be a disruptive, expensive, and inefficient way to move people. This is why, ultimately, many legs of the Interstate System (where tolls are prohibited) within cities were never built.

But highways with their own variable user fees and revenue streams can make a lot of sense, even within cities. These can be highways that pay for themselves, have limited congestion, and provide rights-of-way for faster transit. Instead of being a drain on the budget, they can be self-maintaining and provide substantial economic benefits.

Americans enjoy an incredible level of mobility due to our extensive highway network. But that network is deteriorating because we are not spending enough to adequately maintain it. The lack of funding to maintain the network is directly traceable to a lack of adequate user fees. We should be smart enough not to make that same mistake again.

**May 3, 2011 10:51 AM**



## A View From the Front Lines

By Mortimer L. Downey

Senior Advisor, Parsons Brinckerhoff

Yes we need highways (although probably not so many new ones) and yes we need to maintain the system we have. If we are going to move the needle on energy consumption and foreign oil dependence, yes we need more well maintained and affordable transit--we can't ask people to ride services that aren't there. And yes we need more bike and pedestrian facilities if we want to contribute to the livability of our cities.

What's really important about the Conference of Mayors survey of their membership is that it represents views from the front lines of transportation policy and program delivery. These are the men and women, big city, small city and suburban communities who are closest to the voters and have broad responsibilities to achieve results. The recent discussions about transportation policy have emphasized the concepts of performance based and accountable delivery systems. These folks are the ones who really understand that and we should listen to them.

Some of the criticism of existing program structures dwell on the division between transportation policy and land use policy, or on economic policy and transportation decisions. The local level is the place where these come together--and it's also the place where America finds most of its population, most of its jobs and most of the opportunities for economic growth. The respondents to this survey were not just the big city mayors. Only 14% of the responses came from cities over 500,000 while the majority of the responses were from cities under 100,000. These are the officials who make the calls for policy at the level where real partnerships can be put together among transportation, land use, environment and economic development.

If we want the next reauthorization bill to be one that promises real results, what better way to achieve that than to bring to the table the people who really need to deliver those results. More and more, we have seen local initiatives developed that meet unique local needs and are strongly funded. One reason those initiatives passed was the fact that voters knew who was in charge and what results to expect. There are results we all want to see at a national level, but rather than imposing those results, why not leverage and support local leadership with the tools to fashion local strategies.

There's no doubt that a well-funded, multi-modal, multi-year authorization bill will be a challenge, and I'm sure there are those who will say that two out of three, or even one out

of three, isn't so bad. My view is that of President Obama--we can't sacrifice investment for the future as part of the necessary actions to bring fiscal order in the short term. Take the long view of where we want to be as a strong economy, and more important as an effective society, over the next 20 and 30 years, and develop the strategy to accomplish both goals. And in doing that, we should be listening to and reaching out to those who have a real stake in the success of a 21st Century economy.

The report cites a recent finding from a survey done by the Economist Intelligence Unit for the Philips company. The survey, taken among a worldwide sample of urban professionals--the people who are key to developing that strong and growing economy, reported that no single action that improved transportation was the single most important step their mayors could take to make their cities better places to live and work. The mayors in the USCM survey, who are trying to win in that global competition, get that message and we should to.

May 2, 2011 6:02 PM



## Of Course We Need Highway Investment

By Bob Poole

Director of Transportation Studies, Reason Foundation

Every reputable study during the last four years has found that the United States is under-investing in its highway system. That includes the Policy & Revenue Commission, the Infrastructure Financing Commission, and the U.S. DOT's own biennial Conditions and Performance Report, released last year. The latter is especially important, because its scenarios included several different benefit/cost ratios. Looking only at projects with B/C of at least 1.5, the DOT's report found that America (federal, state, and local) should be investing \$27 billion per year more in our highways just to keep conditions (i.e., pavement) and performance (i.e., congestion) from getting worse as the country grows. To improve things, we could invest \$59 billion per year more, again putting money only into projects whose benefits exceed their costs by at least 50%.

More than half of those totals are for reconstruction and repair of existing highways and bridges. But the balance consists of capacity additions, such as adding lanes to truck-clogged Interstates and adding networks of HOT lanes to congested urban freeway systems. Those are necessary because the most likely scenario is that both population and

our economy will keep growing, which means there will be more personal trips to be taken and more goods to be moved in coming decades. And despite modest increases in the number of transit riders in recent years, nearly every MPO long-range plan is projecting at best single-digit increases in transit mode-share despite the allocation of, in many cases, half or more of all metro-area transportation investment to non-highway modes. That means most of the growth in urban-area trips will continue to be by car.

Similarly for freight, realistic projections of goods-movement mode-share from the industries themselves show only very modest changes over the next 25 or 30 years. Yes, rail intermodal is growing, but from a very low base. And if federal energy policy succeeds in reducing America's dependence on coal, the railroads' largest single commodity will shrink, reducing rail-freight's mode share.

Americans choose cars because for most of them, it's by far the most flexible and convenient mode for most of their trips. Likewise, shippers choose the mode that best balances cost with delivery time and reliability for the specific goods they need shipped. What made sense for much freight in the era before Fedex and just-in-time inventory management and when factories and warehouses were located on long-gone rail sidings no longer makes sense in the 21st century.

**May 2, 2011 10:15 AM**



## **Toll-financed highways could be provided**

By Gabriel Roth

Research Fellow, The Independent Institute

New highway capacity is needed but it is not easy to determine where. We do not use market criteria to select highway investments, and benefit-cost analysis is not popular.

One way to provide highways which even some mayors may welcome is to adopt the suggestion of our panelists Bob Poole and Ken Orski (in their 2003 Reason Foundation *Policy Study* No. 305) for "HOT Networks"—a set of interconnected premium lanes, to be added to congested freeway systems in urban areas by converting existing HOV lanes to HOT [High-Occupancy or Toll] lanes, and using toll revenue bonds to finance the missing links and flyover connectors.

Poole and Orski sketched out such networks for Miami, Atlanta, Dallas/Fort-Worth, Houston, Seattle, DC, San Francisco and Los Angeles. They estimated the costs at \$40

billion, possibly equivalent to \$60 billion today. The networks would be financed by electronically collected tolls, varied to ensure congestion-free travel at all times. Such tolls have been working successfully in Southern California since 1995, and successfully replicated elsewhere.

Express toll lanes, that do not exempt high-occupancy vehicles from payment, would be even more cost-effective.

**May 2, 2011 8:51 AM**



## **Establish Criteria for Repairs**

By Rich Sarles

Interim General Manager of the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority

The debate between federal, state and local officials on which of our many transportation priorities to fund has gone on since the beginning of construction of interstate highway system in the 1950s. One of the premiere infrastructure accomplishments in U.S. history, the federal highway system today is riddled with potholes and crumbling bridges. Like the Washington Metro, there is a significant need to return it to a constant state of good repair . Given the well documented "state of good" repair needs all across the country, policies which address those efforts should be our first priority. Providing states with the discretion and flexibility they need to address their transportation priorities should be another important component of the surface transportation reauthorization bill.

Given the limited transportation dollars that are likely to be available on both federal and state level in the coming years, it is important that leaders at every level, establish criteria for spending that provides their constituents, our customers with the greatest return on their investment.

## Skepticism Greet US DOT's Draft Transportation Bill

Posted by Ken Orski on Thursday, May 5th, 2011

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An undated 498-page draft of US DOT's legislative proposal for surface transportation reauthorization, the "Transportation Opportunities Act," has been making the rounds in Washington for the past week. Its publication, however, has been largely ignored by the transportation community. What would ordinarily be an eagerly awaited event and the source of much comment, has passed virtually unnoticed. Even the usual cheering squad of Administration-supportive advocacy groups such as Transportation for America, the Building America's Future coalition and US PIRG has been muted in its approval.

The reason for this indifference is twofold. Partly, it is because the DOT draft contains no surprises: it merely restates the proposals already revealed in the President's FY 2012 Budget request. But more importantly, the draft has been ignored by Washington stakeholders and political observers because it has been judged to lack political savvy and realism. Even the highly partisan liberal Streetsblog was obliged to pronounce the draft bill as irrelevant. Wrote Tanya Snyder, its Capitol Hill correspondent in a level-headed assessment, "...don't expect it to be central to the debate in Congress. By refusing to adjust to a still-struggling economy, high gas prices, and a deficit-obsessed Congress, the president has rendered his own plan moot."

Snyder's dismissive verdict is understandable. Consider the following:

*Item:* Multiple congressional spokesmen have stated in recent months that future surface transportation funding will be limited to the tax revenues deposited into the Highway Trust Fund. There will be no further rescue or "bailout" of the Trust Fund using general funds; deficit funding is out of the question. The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee reaffirmed this position as recently as March 15 in its "Views and Estimates for Fiscal Year 2012" report. Yet the US DOT chose to ignore these unambiguous congressional signals. Its legislative draft has reaffirmed the initial White House proposal for a six-year surface transportation program totaling \$556 billion, with an up-front FY 2012 appropriation of \$50 billion. Meanwhile, transportation-related tax revenues are expected to average only \$38 billion/year, for a six-year total of \$230 billion according to the latest Congressional Budget Office estimates. In recent appropriation hearings on the FY 2012 transportation budget, Transportation Department officials failed to explain how the resulting shortfall of over \$300 billion would be funded.

*Item:* In its draft bill, the US DOT has proposed to devote \$53 billion over six-years to pursue a "high-speed" rail program that would eventually (in 25 years) give 80 percent of Americans access to high-speed rail service. Yet Congress has rescinded all of FY 2011 funding for the high-speed rail program and House Republican leadership has announced its intention to totally eliminate support for high-speed rail beginning next year. Even if a

modest passenger rail program should survive, it is likely to be focused on the Northeast Corridor, as Rep. Mica has strongly suggested, and not pursue a multi-billion dollar national “high-speed rail” vision as conceived and advocated by the White House.

*Item:* In its draft bill, the US DOT has proposed to expand the existing Highway Trust Fund into a successor “Transportation Trust Fund.” The expanded Fund would include four accounts – for Passenger Rail, Highways, Transit and an Infrastructure Fund. To fund the two new accounts plus the expanded Highway and Transit accounts, the Transportation Department has proposed an unspecified new “energy tax” to supplement the existing sources of revenue (i.e. transportation-related taxes on fuel, heavy trucks and tires). However, the initiative for any new tax measures must originate with the House Ways and Means Committee. With the House Republicans on record as opposed to any new taxes, and with bipartisan desire not to increase the consumers’ cost of energy, any proposed “energy tax” has virtually zero chance of success in the 112th Congress. (Note: it’s not even certain whether the energy tax proposal has survived OMB review).

*Item:* The US DOT has proposed a three-part “Livability” program totaling \$27.5 billion over six years. The program would subsume existing formula-based transportation enhancement activities and include a program of discretionary grants for bicycle, pedestrian and capacity building activities. However, the ill-defined “livability” concept has met with profound skepticism on the part of House Republicans. Congressional sources have made it known that a “livability” program is unlikely to be a part of any future surface transportation bill.

*Item:* The US DOT has proposed a “National Infrastructure Innovation and Finance Fund” to finance transportation infrastructure projects of national and regional significance through grants, loans, loan guarantees and lines of credit. The Fund, to be administered by the Transportation Department, would receive \$30 billion over six years. This proposal faces considerable bipartisan skepticism and overt opposition by several influential House and Senate leaders. Its chances of passage are rated at less than 50-50.

In sum, the unreality of its fiscal ambitions and the political unpopularity of its key programmatic proposals has rendered the DOT’s legislative proposal “dead on arrival” in the judgment of congressional observers. That is not to say that the proposal deserves to be totally ignored. Many of its programmatic provisions – for example, those dealing with accelerated project delivery, tolling, highway and motor vehicle safety, “state of good repair” policy and freight policy—are worthy of consideration and will likely find their way into the final bill.

However, the Washington policy establishment is largely ignoring what it considers as a refusal by the drafters of the US DOT bill to face the facts. Instead, transportation stakeholders are eagerly awaiting the release (probably in late June) of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee bill reflecting the views and sentiments of its chairman John Mica (R-FL) and fellow committee members. It is safe to conclude that what is likely to emerge from that committee — and eventually approved by the full

House and the Senate— will bear little resemblance to the U.S. Transportation Department's legislative proposal.