Last week I had the opportunity to attend a forum outside Washington, D.C. entitled “Changing the Conversation: Advancing a National Infrastructure Improvement Agenda.” The American Society of Civil Engineers, the American Planning Association and other organizations brought together nearly 100 attendees from the business, academic, government, advocacy, public utilities, transportation, planning and research communities to discuss what might be needed to overcome significant communication barriers and make the case for infrastructure investment in the United States. Here’s a rundown of some of the ideas I heard at the meeting, as well as some worthwhile links to the resources of some of the organizations seeking to move the dialogue forward.

**Gorton: Performance Metrics, Demonstrating Return on Investment Key to Restoring Public Confidence**

The forum began Thursday night with an address by former U.S. Senator Slade Gorton (R-WA), who is now co-chair of the Bipartisan Policy Center’s National Transportation Policy Project (one of the event’s other co-sponsors). In his remarks, Gorton emphasized the importance of restoring the faith of the American people in government’s ability to make the right choices in meeting infrastructure needs.

“The American people remember well the ‘Bridge to Nowhere’—infrastructure as it was—and they are convinced that the stimulus didn’t fulfill its lofty promises,” he said. “So they have a low degree of confidence in the government’s ability to set priorities and to carry out its promises.”

Gorton said restoring that confidence and winning support for infrastructure investment will require an emphasis on return on investment and performance metrics at all levels of government.

“I believe it is central to our ability to persuade Congress and the American people to support an infrastructure program we deem necessary,” Gorton said. “How do we transform our current unwillingness or inability to measure effectiveness of what we’re doing into an evidentiary and tangible return-focused investment strategy? With so many conflicting demands, data on measuring and understanding performance is absolutely essential for determining highest priorities and ensuring the best returns on the investment of now very scarce dollars.”

Gorton also had a couple of other key questions he challenged meeting participants to come up with the answers to.

“How do we make fundamental policy choices based on data and evidence rather than on ideology or geography,” he asked. “How do we move from the growing ambiguity of federal, state and private roles to a new federalism and an appropriate reliance on market forces in preserving and upgrading our nation’s critical infrastructure?”

**Infrastructure & Economic Growth**
Day two of the forum began with a panel of business leaders and logistics and infrastructure experts discussing the importance of infrastructure to the nation’s economic future. The panelists included Mike Gray, a former Vice President for Supply Chain Management at Dell Computer, Jeff Sterba, President and CEO of American Water Company, and Terry O’Sullivan, General President of the Laborers’ International Union of North America. The wide-ranging discussion offered up plenty to chew on. Among the thoughts expressed by speakers during the session:

- Industry wants to improve the reliability and predictability of the transportation network.
- There’s a 20 percent unemployment rate in the construction industry. Not only are we not improving and repairing the infrastructure, we’re not putting people to work as we could be. The record level of unemployment in the construction industry has a big impact on the economy. It also means we are losing skill sets among workers in the industry.
- In order to have a first world economy, we can’t have a third world infrastructure.
- Public-private partnerships, tolling and infrastructure banks all need to be a part of the transportation funding mix. But those things alone won’t get us where we need to be in 30 years. Additional funding and financing mechanisms are needed.
- The American people need to be better informed about the roads they use. There needs to be more transparency in the system so that people know what they are paying for and what things actually cost.
- We have plenty of transportation capacity. The problem is the transportation system congests at peak times. It may be necessary to provide disincentives to travel at those peak times (i.e. congestion pricing of roads).
- There is a need to change the narrative in Washington from being all about deficit reduction. The value proposition of infrastructure investment for the nation’s long-term economic health should be emphasized. Proposals such as the National Infrastructure Bank can be viewed as potential deficit reducers.
- America is building shovel-ready projects rather than shovel-worthy ones.

**Public Views on Infrastructure & Reshaping the Message**

Attendees next heard from representatives of two polling and focus group research and strategy firms, Presentation Testing and Public Opinion Strategies, about how Americans view infrastructure spending and what arguments they respond to. Among their findings:

- There’s a clear partisan divide in support for infrastructure spending.
- It’s not a shortage of money that’s viewed to be the problem; it’s the wasting of money by government.
- There is no public recognition of the need for additional taxation to fund infrastructure.
- It’s impossible to defend earmarks in the public’s eyes.
- Americans recognize the importance of infrastructure to the economy but they’re not willing to pay more for it.
- Policymakers should focus on having a plan where benefits to citizens are visible and where they know there is accountability for spending. But even then, they won’t be able to win over everyone.
- “Success” may have to be defined as no cuts to infrastructure.
- Americans are supportive of several new financing measures (public-private partnerships, etc.) but they’re leery of those that require them to foot the bill. One survey found 78 percent favored more private investment, while only 27 percent supported an increased federal gas tax and only 32 percent supported increased tolls.
- Many Americans support concepts like government accountability for keeping projects on-time and on-budget, greater say for local regions, a “fix-it-first” policy in infrastructure improvement, more competitive grants programs in transportation, a National Infrastructure Bank, and “use-it-or-lose-it”
policies for federal funds such as those employed during the Recovery Act.

- Only about 40 percent responded favorably to the concept of a pilot program to replace the gas tax with a user fee such as a vehicle miles traveled tax.

- In one survey, 71 percent said they want their elected leaders to seek common ground on transportation infrastructure. That’s a higher percentage than wants leaders to seek common ground on the budget deficit or other issues.

- Some benefits of infrastructure investment have greater appeal to Americans than others and should perhaps be emphasized more by policymakers. “Providing safer streets for communities and children” scored particularly high (57%). “Providing more transportation options” (32%) and “faster commutes” (21%) scored less well.

- Making the argument of spending less time in traffic is more effective when mentioned in the context of quality of life. If it can be shown that a specific transportation project can cut an hour off a commute, an hour that the commuter can spend with his or her kids instead, that’s something they may be willing to pay for.

- Allowing commuters to see progress firsthand helps advance the argument for infrastructure investment.

- The way that transportation is financed in this country is still an abstraction to many that needs to be made more concrete. Policymakers and others haven’t adequately explained to the public what the federal gas tax is used for versus what state gas taxes are used for. Many Americans mistakenly believe their gas taxes go up every year.

Role of the Policymaker in Fostering Leadership for Infrastructure Development

The response of decision makers to those public attitudes was the focus of the day’s next panel. Among the participants was Virginia Transportation Secretary Sean Connaughton. As I’ve reported previously on this blog (see here [3] and here [4]), since Gov. Bob McDonnell took office, Virginia’s department of transportation under Connaughton has focused on a series of audits aimed at determining whether transportation dollars were moving to the projects and infrastructure for which they were intended. One of the audits resulted in the recommendation of 54 program reforms, 47 of which were approved this year by the state legislature, Connaughton told meeting attendees. Unspent revenues turned up by the audit will allow the Commonwealth to put $4 billion in capital transportation funds on the streets within three years. The audits may have the added effect of restoring the faith of Virginia voters in the state department of transportation, which could come in handy in the future if decision makers have to ask Virginians to pay a little more to support infrastructure improvements.

Connaughton shared the stage with two other panelists—Betty Anne Kane of the Washington, D.C. Public Utilities Commission and Jeff Shane, a former Undersecretary for Policy at the U.S. Department of Transportation. Among the ideas of interest expressed at the session:

- Transportation assets need to be properly priced and that means user fees.
- We can’t keep asking the public the same question about whether they support user fees. We need to start educating them about how they work.
- Rather than emphasizing the Herculean effort it will take to address the nation’s infrastructure needs, policymakers need to emphasize goals that are “well within reach,” as the title of a recent report put it (see my blog post about it here [5]). America must take a step-by-step approach to addressing these needs rather than trying to tackle the multi-million dollar problem all at once.

Overcoming Barriers to Infrastructure Development

The final panel of the conference highlighted two state programs as examples where leaders were able to overcome barriers to push ahead for infrastructure development. Utah Transit Authority CEO
John Inglish was on hand to tout Envision Utah, a program I’ve highlighted before in the context of our 2009 policy brief on “Sustainable Communities & Smart Growth.” [6] Created by the business community in 1997, the public-private, nonprofit corporation Envision Utah has served as a facilitator for ongoing discussions about the state’s future growth. By the year 2020, the Greater Wasatch Area of Utah is expected to add a million more residents. State leaders had the foresight to recognize that accommodating that many more people in such a relatively small area would require creative thinking with regards to how they were all going to live and get around. Investing in transit and transit-oriented development have become key solutions to the sustainability equation for Salt Lake City. More than 100 other Utah communities have also partnered with Envision Utah to assess their growth concerns.

Joining Inglish on the panel were Mark Gerencser of technology consulting firm Booz-Allen Hamilton and Sam Staley, director of urban and land use policy at the Reason Foundation.

“The solution is not a funding problem, it’s a value issue,” Staley told meeting participants. “People will fund something if they think it adds value.”

Also on the panel was Doug McDonald, former Secretary of the Washington state Department of Transportation (2001-07). It was under McDonald’s watch that the department addressed longstanding accountability and trust issues by establishing and publicizing quantifiable benchmarks for measuring performance. That focus on accountability allowed state officials to win legislative passage of a five-cent gas tax in 2003 after increases were rejected in 2001 and 2002. The increase allowed the state to fund a series of high-priority “nickel projects” selected by lawmakers. After demonstrating they could bring the projects in on-time and on-budget, the department was able to push for a second, phased-in 9.5 cent gas tax hike two years later to fund the largest transportation package in the state’s history, an $8.5 billion plan.

Among the other ideas gleaned from this session:

- The first step in addressing a need is getting the “mega-community” to understand the problem.
- Other states and communities need an Envision Utah-like process because it’s important to get communities to decide what they want to be.
- It’s necessary to prioritize and put something at the top of the list to tackle first.
- It’s necessary to focus on the outcome, how we get to that outcome and what options are available to help us get there.

Rendell Emphasizes Quality of Life, Economic Competitiveness

Attendees next heard a keynote address from former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, who is co-chairman of the Building America’s Future Educational Fund, one of the forum’s other co-sponsors. He highlighted infrastructure as the best creator of jobs and emphasized that the United States can’t continue to lead the world with a second class infrastructure.

He too emphasized quality of life as a major selling point in winning support for infrastructure investment. An hour of commute time a day adds up significantly over the course of a year, he pointed out. That is time commuters could be spending with their kids.

Rendell further emphasized several of the aforementioned strategies for winning public support for investment including transparency and accountability, cost-benefit analysis and long-term vision.

He expressed support for a National Infrastructure Bank, banning earmarks, and competitive grant programs such as TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery), which began
under the Recovery Act to provide funding for multi-modal, multi-jurisdictional projects. Rendell said the stimulus gave us a glimpse of what the structure of the federal program should be.

Long a proponent of tolling, Rendell said the federal government needs to allow tolling on Interstate highways. He expressed support for dynamic road pricing and congestion pricing. Rendell also said the TIFIA program (Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act), which provides federal credit assistance to finance transportation projects of national and regional significance, needs to be five times the size it has been. In addition, Rendell said, the federal government needs to take the $15 billion cap off Private Activity Bonds, which allow private participation in tax-exempt facility bonds for qualified highway or surface freight facilities. Rendell would also like to see the reinstatement of the Build America Bonds program, which was also created under the Recovery Act and which helped states and localities reduce the cost of borrowing to build infrastructure projects.

Rendell said if the public knows what their money is going for, they will support spending. He pointed out that 61 percent of state and local transportation ballot measures to increase taxes to fund specific projects were approved in 2010 despite the prevailing conservative mood of the electorate.

“The difference is, when people were asked to pay a half cent for this or a half cent for that, they knew the specific projects that would be built as a result of their vote,” he told attendees.

Rendell said he’d ultimately like to see the federal government put together a 10-year plan to revitalize the nation’s infrastructure by spending $300 billion a year. Such a program could create 7.5 million jobs and stabilize American manufacturing, Rendell said. Policymakers need to recognize that it’s okay to spend and okay to invest. “We’ll get it back,” Rendell said.

Conference Attendees Identify Barriers, Innovative Ideas to Address Them and Potential Next Steps

Following Rendell’s remarks, attendees broke into groups to address three questions:

- What are the most critical barriers that must be overcome to advance a national conversation on public infrastructure development?
- What innovative ideas have come out of the conference sessions that can address those barriers and which ones represent key elements of a vision for the future of public infrastructure?
- What next steps are important and what commitments can your organization/sector make to move the conversation forward?

Here are some of the ideas the groups came up with:

**Barriers:**

- Lack of trust, straight talk, transparency and accountability.
- Lack of documentation of return on investment and cost-benefit analysis.
- Poor planning and, in particular, a lack of regional planning.
- Lack of political leadership at all levels.
- Lack of public understanding on how infrastructure is paid for, life cycle costs of the system and other issues.
- Infrastructure not adequately priced or valued.
- Increasing politicization of infrastructure debates.
- The infrastructure funding paradigm doesn’t work. Funds are drying up and state and federal responsibilities are inadequately defined in an era of strained resources.
- Federal programs need to be streamlined and their efficiency increased.
Innovative Ideas:

- Redefining the federal interest in transportation and infrastructure policy.
- Thinking and talking about national challenges in a local way.
- Rebuilding trust in state agencies before moving forward to seek additional revenues and investment.
- Good regional planning
- Identifying leadership at all levels
- Considering the benefits of full-cost, variable or dynamic road pricing.
- Communicating the benefits of user fees including quality of life improvement.
- Seeking more private investment.
- Promoting transportation demand management programs.
- Encouraging use of intelligent transportation system technologies to improve traffic flow and address other transportation system needs.
- Deconstructing the investment – presenting policymakers and voters with a breakdown of how infrastructure investments could be paid for and what those dollars would buy.
- Local bond measures and referenda can help voters understand benefits of investment to their community.
- More performance measures at the state level.

Next Steps:

- Engaging a broader, more diverse public; widening the coalition to push for infrastructure investment; identifying business and community partners.
- Identifying states, localities where forums like this one can be repeated.
- Developing a strategy for state/federal coordination.
- Developing a shared future vision, framework and decision-making structure. Putting the emphasis on flexibility, adaptability and identifiable value in creating a national strategy that can be implemented locally.
- Reaching out to policymakers at all levels to find champions for infrastructure.
- Engaging Governors and state department of transportation officials to make the case for what the loss of federal dollars would mean for states.
- Finding the right way to talk to the public about infrastructure investment, including putting an emphasis on outcomes.
- Developing a strategic communications plan.
- Producing a grassroots, viral communications campaign to inform the public.
- Convincing policymakers that infrastructure investment is good politics.

The Road Ahead

Last week’s meeting, while essentially a conversation about how to have the other conversations that need to take place in the months and years ahead regarding the future of our infrastructure, was successful for at least one thing: it got a group of diverse stakeholders together to focus on the hurdles they face and what it may take to get over them.

From here the dialogue will continue and expand. Organizers say they will continue working jointly through the informal coalition of groups that hosted the event, which in addition to the aforementioned groups also includes the Natural Resources Defense Council, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Laborers’ International Union of North America. They invited other interested stakeholders to join them as well.

“Rebuilding our nation’s public infrastructure is a problem that we know we can solve,” said Andy
Herrmann, president-elect of the American Society of Civil Engineers. “We have the technological capacity to do so right now. However, while it is the vital lifeblood of our economy and our lives, well-functioning infrastructure is not free.”

**Resources and Additional Reading**

The Council of State Governments, [*States Perform*](#) [7]

American Society of Civil Engineers, [*“Report Card for America’s Infrastructure.”*](#) [8] 2009


Envision Utah, [*“The History of Envision Utah.”*](#) [10]


Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia. [*“Well Within Reach: America’s New Transportation Agenda.”*](#) [13] October 2010


U.S. Chamber of Commerce, [*“Jobs Agenda: Infrastructure.”*](#) [21]

U.S. Chamber of Commerce, [*“Let’s Rebuild America: Transportation Performance Index.”*](#) [22]

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**Policy Area** [24]›**Transportation** [25]›**Administration and Finance** [26]›**Alternative Funding Sources**

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