Before I depart for the holidays, I thought I would leave you transportation policy fans with a few things to read on those iPads and Kindle Fires you may find under the tree Sunday morning. In what has become an annual tradition, it’s time to clear out the CSG Transportation inbox so we can start fresh in the New Year. There are lots of items below on many of the issues we cover regularly here on the blog including: state transportation funding, the condition of infrastructure, public-private partnerships and the like. Plus, I have links to a few lists looking back on 2011 and forecasts for 2012. So let’s dive in...

**Surface Transportation Authorization**

- Larry Ehl of Transportation Issues Daily argues that hopes for a new surface transportation authorization bill in Washington took “two steps forward and one step backward” in 2011.
- The American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) Journal Weekly Transportation Report took a look at what came out of that contentious Senate Commerce Committee hearing I blogged about last week.
- A recent blog post from Marc Scribner of the conservative Competitive Enterprise Institute takes issue with the plan by House Republicans to pay for their authorization bill by opening up more federal land and offshore areas to oil and gas extraction. Scribner argues that it would move transportation funding away from the “user pays/user benefits” principle to a “taxpayer pays” principle. “The myopic Republican plan to partially fund transportation improvements through oil and gas lease revenues—breaking with the long-established “user pays” principle—will almost certainly increase political manipulation of transportation investments in the future, thereby increasing waste, fraud and abuse,” he writes.
- MAP-21, the Senate’s bipartisan version of the authorization bill approved by the Environment and Public Works Committee earlier this year, includes an expansion of the popular TIFIA credit program which helps fund innovative projects. But some are now questioning whether committee chair Barbara Boxer (D-CA) gave up too much to garner support for the measure when she introduced new rules for the program that would mean environmentally sustainable projects would no longer have an advantage in the selection process for TIFIA funding. Matt Sledge wrote about the issue on The Huffington Post this week.

**Condition of Infrastructure/Cost to Repair**

- The Latest America THINKS survey from the infrastructure firm HNTB Corporation shows 62 percent of Americans believe most U.S. bridges are in poor condition and nearly three-quarters think they are not inspected as often and thoroughly as they should be. Nearly half of those surveyed said they would prefer to pay more tolls rather than higher taxes in order to fund bridge maintenance and construction in the future.
- University of Minnesota transportation expert David Levinson’s blog The Transportationist had a post recently on why transportation projects cost so much. Among his hypotheses: “Public works agencies are spending other people’s money, and so are less motivated to get value for dollar than
an individual consumer on their own.” “Projects are scoped wrong.” “Benefits are concentrated, costs are diffuse.” “No one actually does (benefit/cost) analysis.” Brad Plumer of The Washington Post had some additional analysis of Levinson’s list.

- The latest report from the nonprofit transportation research organization TRIP (The Road Information Program) focuses on the state of Maine. It’s entitled “The Top 50 Surface Transportation Projects to Support Economic Growth and Quality of Life in Maine.”

- Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood recently touted a federally funded interchange improvement project in Delaware that’s expected to bring some congestion relief along the I-95 corridor.

- Virginia Transportation Secretary (and CSG Transportation Policy Task Force Vice Chair) Sean Connaughton believes the physical and financial limits of building and maintaining roads make it necessary that state government do what it can to encourage telework, also known as telecommuting. He spoke about the issue at the Telework Exchange Town Hall Meeting in D.C. this fall, which was covered by Federal Computer Week magazine. Connaughton said Virginia is looking at providing tax credits or other incentives to employers who decide to buy equipment that would enable employees to work from home or remote sites.

**Gas Taxes**

- The Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy has a 50-state analysis out this month that finds that states are collectively losing more than $10 billion annually due to construction cost increases that have occurred since the last time their gas taxes were raised. The report, “Building a Better Gas Tax: How to Fix One of State Government’s Least Sustainable Revenue Sources,” finds that the average state has not increased its gas tax in over a decade and 14 states have not done so in 20 years or longer (for Alaska, 41 years). When adjusted for the increases in construction costs, the average state’s gasoline tax rate has effectively fallen by 20 percent. The report offers three policy recommendations for modernizing state gas taxes:

  1. Increasing gas tax rates to (at least) reverse their long term declines.
  2. Restructuring state gas taxes so that their rates rise automatically alongside the inevitable growth in the cost of transportation construction projects.
  3. Creating or enhancing targeted tax credits for low income families to offset the impact of gas tax reform.

- Tax Foundation economist Mark Robyn talked to Governing magazine earlier this month on the issue of whether it’s time for states to rethink the gas tax.

- The Missouri Department of Transportation is talking about funding a $1.5 billion to $4 billion widening of Interstate 70 between St. Louis and Kansas City by nearly doubling its 17 cent a gallon state gas tax over 10 years. But the blog Gateway Streets pointed out this week that even such a move would fall well short of funding the I-70 project not to mention any future projects.

- Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad said this week that a phased gas tax increase is likely for his state in the future but probably won’t happen in 2012. He expects Iowa will have enough transportation funds next year thanks to favorable bid prices, budget savings and receipt of federal funding that exceeded forecast amounts. “So the problem isn’t this coming year. It’s going to be subsequent years,” he told The (Eastern Iowa) Gazette. The governor also said he would support efforts to put money generated by controversial traffic-monitoring cameras directly into the state road use tax fund.

- The Gainesville Sun reported this week that dwindling fuel tax revenues could undermine Florida’s road-building budget and cause major projects to be delayed or canceled next year. Gov. Rick Scott’s spending plan sent to lawmakers this month would cut the road budget by nearly $1.2 billion. Falling fuel tax revenues have resulted in the loss of $8.7 billion in road projects over the last five years, according to a recent state analysis.
Recent reports from Wisconsin [19] and Ohio [20] examine who really pays for roads. Among the reports’ conclusions: all forms of transportation require public subsidies (especially highways); and highways do not pay for themselves. The Wisconsin report found that the state could fully fund its roads by raising the gas tax by 50 cents per gallon or by imposing highway tolls.

A piece in The Economist last month looked at “The Efficiency Conundrum” [21] in America, which finds the nation’s highway system being imperiled by a combination of less driving and more fuel efficient vehicles. But this blog post on the Seattle news site Publicola [22] argues that blaming hybrids and electric cars for the decline in gas tax revenues to fix roads is not very realistic.

In case you missed it: a Government Accountability Office report [23] in September found that from 2005 to 2009, every state received more funding for highway programs than they contributed to the Highway Account of the Highway Trust Fund.

State Funding for Transportation

A task force appointed by Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire has recommended the state raise $20 billion during the next 10 years to fund transportation. New taxes, fees and tolls are among the possible funding methods that could be considered to raise the money. Specifically, a 15 to 20 cents per gallon increase in the state’s 37.5-cent fuel tax rate has been discussed, which could raise between $3.3 and $4.7 billion. A 10 percent increase in the gross vehicle weight fee for trucks may also be considered. State lawmakers are expected to work on the specifics during their 2012 session. Land Line magazine has more. [24]

The Denver Business Journal reports [25] that Colorado voters may be asked to approve new taxes in 2012 to fund road improvements and to complete a transit project in Denver.

The (Muncie, IN) Star Press had a piece [26] recently assessing the legacy of Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels. Andrea Neal writes that Daniels’ foremost accomplishment comes down to one word: infrastructure.

The Richmond Times-Dispatch reports [27] that the legacy of another Governor who has focused on infrastructure, Virginia’s Bob McDonnell, may be defined by what’s expected to be a $78 billion budget next year. McDonnell has said [28] he wants to incrementally increase the portion of the state sales tax that is dedicated to transportation starting with the upcoming two-year budget in order to generate an estimated $110 million for transportation maintenance.

All eyes in the transportation world will be on Georgia in July of 2012, when voters in several regions around the state will head to the polls to decide whether to approve a one cent sales tax increase to fund regionally identified transportation projects. But as the Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported earlier this month, even if the regional transportation referendum passes, it will likely face a legal challenge in the courts. Opponents argue the referendum would be unconstitutional because it would not allow individual counties in a region to opt out of the tax. You can follow all of the AJC’s coverage of the referendum here [29].

Three previous successful campaigns to raise revenue for transportation were profiled earlier this year in a report prepared for AASHTO by Parsons Brinckerhoff. The report, “Strategies and Messages,” [30] looks at a 2008 ballot measure in Los Angeles County, the 2009 Oregon Jobs and Transportation Act, and the 2010 T-WORKS program in Kansas. Also worth seeking out is a companion brief prepared for AASHTO by Maslansky Luntz and Partners that examines new ways to talk about transportation that can generate support for revenue increases. That brief, entitled “The New Language of Mobility: Talking Transportation in a Post-Recession World,” [31] touches on many of the issues we’ve examined here on the blog this year, including in this post from May. [32] Both briefs are follow-ups to a 2009 report called “Making the Case for Transportation Investment and Revenue.” [33]

In this essay [34], Paul Yarossi, the President of engineering/architecture firm HNTB Holdings argues that making that case should include emphasizing and illustrating infrastructure’s return on investment.
Public-Private Partnerships

- A report out this month from the Brookings Institution recommends three actions states should take to develop the technical capacity and expertise required in order to fully take advantage of P3s and fully protect the public interest. They include: establishing specialized institutional dedicated P3 units to tackle bottlenecks in the P3 process and protect the public interest; passing legislation and changing the procurement culture to a more transparent and outcome-based project selection process; and working with the federal government to address technical assistance gaps on P3s, on an as-needed basis. The report’s authors note that only three states currently have dedicated P3 units: Virginia, California and Michigan. Several other states (Oregon, Colorado, Georgia and Washington) have P3 offices.

- Tollroadsnews recently looked at Virginia’s efforts to move forward on two P3s: a 58-year toll concession with Macquarie and Skanska to upgrade three tunnels in Norfolk and a 73-year toll concession deal with Transurban and Fluor to develop 29 miles of toll express/bus lanes on I-95 in Northern Virginia.

- The Pennsylvania Senate earlier this month passed legislation that would allow state government and local transportation authorities to partner with private groups to get work done on existing transportation infrastructure, Land Line magazine reported.

- The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reports that Georgia has scrapped its plans for a $1 billion P3 to add express toll lanes along Interstates 75 and 575 in Cobb and Cherokee counties. Three teams of international road builders were set to bid on the project early on 2012. Although no reason was given for the cancellation, Gov. Nathan Deal had recently expressed concern after traffic projections suggested congestion relief would be limited to those drivers opting to use the new toll lanes. Tollroadsnews has more on the cancellation.

Tolling

- U.S. Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Rep. Michael Grimm (R-NY) have introduced legislation to increase federal oversight of road toll rates, Streetsblog Capitol Hill reports. The “Commuter Protection Act” would give the U.S. Department of Transportation the authority to determine whether tolls on interstate bridges and tunnels are “just and reasonable” and set lower maximum tolls if they deem it necessary, powers the agency had up until 1987. The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey last year announced phased-in toll increases on area bridges. Tollroadsnews has more on the bill. The American Trucking Associations has weighed-in in support of the measure. But Emil Frankel of the Bipartisan Policy Center argues in a recent National Journal blog post that: “Given the growing scarcity of resources for transportation investment and operations, the hand of the federal government should be lighter, not heavier, as states and metropolitan regions attempt to develop revenues for investment in their transportation facilities and systems.” The International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association says the measure would stifle innovation and funding, constrain public and private investment and add an unnecessary layer of federal oversight to what is largely a state and local process.

- Bob Poole of the Reason Foundation writes this month about the question of when a toll ceases to be a true user charge and becomes a tax.

- But the Northeast isn’t the only part of the country moving forward with tolls. Tollroadsnews reported this month on the opening of the first toll road in North Carolina in the modern era, the Triangle Expressway near Raleigh.

- The Transportation Research Board’s National Cooperative Freight and Highway Research Programs have a new report that examines views of the trucking industry with regards to tolling.
A new Reason-Rupe Transportation Poll [50] shows 77 percent of Americans oppose raising the gas tax and favor tolls.

**Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) Taxes**

A task force in Minnesota has told state transportation officials that while implementing a mileage-based user fee in the state could be fair and flexible, it should not be implemented until certain concerns are addressed, including: privacy, administrative cost, complexity, phasing and unfamiliarity of the concept among policy makers and the public. There is more about the task force’s findings on the Minnesota Department of Transportation website. [51]

“The nation needs to transition to a different way of providing the necessary funding to keep our transportation infrastructure in a state of good repair and responsive to new demands being placed on it,” argues Georgia Institute of Technology Engineering Professor Michael Meyer in an opinion piece for CNN.com [52] this month. “The (vehicle miles traveled)-based fee is a strong candidate to be that new system.” Meyer writes that although successful demonstrations of such an approach have been done in several U.S. states and cities as well as in several European countries, a full transition to a VMT system here hasn’t happened for a number of reasons, including: uncertainty about how revenues would be collected, privacy concerns about the vehicle use monitoring that might be required for such a system to work, and the fact that a transition could take years as cars are retrofitted and the public is educated on how the system works. Nevertheless, Meyer points out that “the nation faced similar challenges when motor fuel taxes were introduced as a transportation funding source.”

In a recent newsletter [53], the group Kentuckians for Better Transportation also weighs in on the VMT debate. Citing VMT tests and pilot projects in states such as Oregon, Colorado and Minnesota, the newsletter includes this call to action: “C’mon Kentucky … It’s pointless to blame the federal government or wait on other states to do this research and analysis for us. Let’s resolve in 2012 that we will study a driver-friendly “opt-in” VMT program for Kentucky drivers. Our surface transportation system and our public transit systems are too important to wait on others to find answers for us.”

When the AASHTO Standing Committee on Highways convened at the association’s annual meeting in Detroit this fall, members heard a presentation on the latest research on public acceptance of mileage-based user fees. Paul Hanley of the University of Iowa reported that preliminary results gathered from a two-year field study showed the more exposure a driver has to the idea of a VMT fee, the more likely the driver is to accept it. There is more on the field study here. [54]

**TIGER Program**

In my blog post last week [5], I took a look at the latest round of TIGER grant recipients which have a substantial freight component. TIGER, which stands for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery, was originally created under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act to spur competition among the states for innovative, multi-modal and multi-jurisdictional transportation projects. Streetsblog Capitol Hill has more [55] this week on the freight projects that received funding. They note that over $232 million or 45 percent of the latest round of funding will go to freight projects. But the nation’s freight rail system, which many hope can be upgraded to help reduce road congestion and improve air quality, received only about a quarter of the freight dollars allocated from TIGER (road, bridge and port improvements got the rest). Streetsblog’s Ben Goldman writes that it is a good sign that three Class II regional railroads in Massachusetts, Kansas and Kentucky are among the latest TIGER beneficiaries since the survival of small railroads will be key to getting more trucks off the nation’s roads. Transportation Issues Daily’s Larry Ehl has a breakdown of the TIGER rail projects, including commuter rail and rail transit projects, here. [56]

The Transportation Nation Blog says [57] Illinois, California and Virginia were among the biggest winners in the latest round of TIGER funding.
AASHTO notes that 12 state DOTs were awarded $149 million of the $511 million in TIGER funds awarded. Bike and pedestrian projects around the country were also big winners, Streetsblog’s Angie Schmitt writes. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood notes that $150 million in TIGER discretionary awards went to 16 rural and 4 tribal communities. Of course, not every important project around the country received funding. An interchange project in Montana and three bridge projects in Arizona were among those that didn’t make the cut. Larry Ehl at Transportation Issues Daily broke down the TIGER III awards by state and by project dollar amount. The National Center for Freight and Infrastructure Research & Education issued a report this fall looking at freight-focused “Performance Measures for Evaluating Multi-State Projects” like many of the ones funded under TIGER which were deemed to have the potential for regional or national significance.

State Grant Programs

Progressive Railroading reports that the North Carolina Department of Transportation is currently soliciting funding proposals for projects across all transportation modes that are designed to relieve congestion and enhance mobility in the state. The state’s Mobility Fund, which was proposed by Gov. Bev Perdue and set up by the legislature, will provide funding for projects that win favor. A data-driven approach will be used to determine which ones would provide the greatest benefit in travel-time savings and increase overall system efficiency.

State Transportation Planning

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has issued a new 50-year vision document that is the result of months of work and input from the public and the transportation community. The document, which can be read here, offers long-range objectives for all parts of the state’s transportation system and will help determine the transportation initiatives the state chooses for investment in the decades ahead.

Project Delivery & Accountability

An investigation by Gannett Newspapers found that about half of the 21 federally funded highway projects they surveyed came in with significant cost overruns, delays or both. Moreover, a vast majority are subject to little to no federal oversight. A handful of states—including Arkansas, California, Georgia, Iowa, Missouri, Oregon and Texas—have adopted best practices and spend more time analyzing costs and identifying potential risks, the report noted. The Michigan Department of Transportation for example uses a software system that monitors project expenses in real time and creates monthly reports to the state transportation commission. Transportation projects in Michigan averaged just 1.5 percent over bid in 2010. Similarly, Oregon has been able to manage costs on many projects thanks to “systems of sharing information” and “mandatory reporting,” an article in the (Willamette Valley) Statesman Journal noted. But the Federal Highway Administration currently lacks the authority to impose best practices on other states. Streetsblog Capitol Hill also notes that the process of project selection isn’t what it could be. A Government Accountability Office report last year found that while 30 states said “political support” was a key variable in selecting projects, only 11 states said the same about “economic analysis.” The Florida Times-Union had an article this week on why road projects in the Sunshine State can sometimes take decades from drawing board to reality. And in case you missed it, my two part series for The Lane Report, a Kentucky business magazine, on why road projects in Kentucky take such a long time can still be found online. Part 1 in the
September issue is entitled “Why New Roads Take Years: Consideration of stakeholder concerns, compliance with environmental and historical protection laws slow projects.” Part 2 from October looks at “Speeding Up Road Projects: Streamline complicated funding process, allow multiple planning steps at a time to get work done years faster.”

- New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed legislation this month that gives five state entities, including the state department of transportation, the authority to enter into design-build contracts for capital infrastructure projects. State officials hope the legislation will assist them in pursuing more innovative, alternative project delivery methods to meet a backlog of infrastructure needs. An effort to replace the Tappan Zee Bridge across the Hudson River is among the candidates mentioned for use of the design-build authority. The Infra Insight Blog has more on the legislation. This chart has a rundown of which states currently have legislative design-build authority.
- Government Computer News reported last month that North Carolina’s Department of Transportation is using special computer software to analyze geographic data to help narrow the choices of possible road corridors and reduce the cost of land surveys. NCDOT officials say the analytics software can save $500,000 per project and shave 20 percent off the time needed to select and plan a road.

**Project Planning & Design**

- I’ve written previously about the growing popularity of the diverging diamond or double crossover diamond, a type of traffic interchange that can be installed at a fraction of the cost of other interchange redesigns in much less time and often with significant improvements to mobility and accident reduction. Not everyone is a fan of the diamond, an engineering import from Europe. The Strong Towns blog had a report recently on why the diamond puts pedestrians and bicyclists at a disadvantage.

**Transportation Safety**

- CNN.com reported last week that the National Transportation Safety Board’s recent proposal to prohibit drivers from using cell phones will likely not meet with much success in state capitals. CSG Executive Director and CEO David Adkins told the newspaper: “I don’t believe most state lawmakers would say (the NTSB recommendation) is viable ... If it gets people’s attention, it will do good ... I just hope they pursue their campaign through cooperation and collaboration rather than preemption or mandates on the states, in other words forcing it down states' throats.”
- John Gramlich of Stateline has reaction from some state officials to the proposed ban. Florida Senate Transportation Committee Chairman Jack Latvala: “You know the NRA saying that if they want my gun they’ll pry it from my cold dead hands? That’s what I think about banning cell phones and driving ... Absolutely no chance.”
- Despite the fact that nearly two-thirds of states ban texting while driving, it hasn’t stopped drivers from doing it, the Associated Press reported recently.
- Citing safety concerns, Pennsylvania transportation officials have reportedly withdrawn a federal application seeking permission to raise money for road and bridge repairs by selling advertisements on electronic message signs designed to give public safety announcements, traffic updates and other alerts.
- AAA and Cambridge Systematics issued a report last month comparing the costs to society of “Crashes vs. Congestion.”

**Intelligent Transportation Systems**

- The AASHTO Journal Weekly Transportation Report highlights a high-occupancy toll (HOT) lanes project on I-95 in Florida. The project, which includes the installation of Intelligent Transportation System components, will take about three years to complete at a cost of $106 million. Phase one of
the 95 Express, which opened three years ago, is considered one of the most successful congestion management projects in the nation. According to AASHTO it “provides a case study for other state transportation departments considering High Occupancy Toll lanes and dynamic pricing.”

- **The (Wilmington) News Journal has a story** [88] on Delaware’s use of a system of traffic sensors and cameras to help reduce congestion and synchronize traffic signals.

- Pike Research has a new Research Report entitled “Smart Transportation Systems: Intelligent Transportation Technologies in the Age of Smart Cities: Traffic Management, Smart Charging, Public Transit and Vehicle-to-Vehicle Systems.” [89] The report estimates that global investment in ITS will total $13.1 billion between 2011 and 2017 with most of the investment in traffic management systems. Various approaches to ITS being taken in key countries around the world are assessed in the report.

- Closer to home, the U.S. Department of Transportation reports that more than 90 percent of our nation’s toll lanes and plazas use some type of electronic toll collection system. Some of the fastest growing ITS technologies in the U.S. include those supporting real-time data collection and traveler information dissemination and those supporting transit management. There is more in the DOT’s 2010 Intelligent Transportation System Deployment Tracking Survey, which you’ll find [here] [90]. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood also touted the growth in the use of ITS technologies in a blog post [91] earlier this fall.

- A number of the latest technologies were touted at the ITS World Congress, which was held in October in Orlando. Larry Ehl of Transportation Issues Daily had [this report on the conference] [92].

- The Huffington Post had a recent report [93] on active transportation management systems being planned for Virginia and New York City. It includes a video of how such systems work.

- The Greater Greater Washington blog took a look [94] recently at the potential timetable for widespread use of self-driving cars or “autonomous vehicles.” A follow-up post [95] looked at how self-driving cars will change transportation.

**Alternative Fuels/Vehicles**

- Tollroadsnews reported last week [96] on plans to install electric vehicle chargers at 17 service plazas on the Pennsylvania Turnpike. A $1 million grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection will aid the development of electric vehicle infrastructure on the turnpike.

- A new Pike Research Report has [ten electric vehicle predictions for 2012] [97]. Among them: “Employers will begin to purchase EV chargers in large numbers.” Pike expects hundreds of global companies to follow the lead of Adobe, SAP and Google which have already installed dozens of chargers. Pike also predicts that while state governments may try to target owners of hybrids and electric vehicles that do not pay their fair share for the use of roads (since they don’t pay gas taxes) with vehicle miles traveled (VMT) taxes, they are unlikely to meet with success due to continuing privacy concerns and other factors. The report suggests that a yearly fee based on average vehicle usage that also adjusts for greenhouse gas emissions could be more palatable to electric vehicle owners.

- The Kansas City Star reported [98] this month that natural gas vehicles are making inroads in the U.S. market and that efforts are underway to open more fueling stations. Three energy companies have joined a four-state group to lobby state legislatures to pass legislation to ensure motorists have a reliable supply of fuel for their natural gas-powered vehicles.

**Transportation & the Environment**

both technological and behavioral strategies.

- Some metropolitan planning organizations around the country are concerned about a provision included in the Senate’s MAP-21 authorization bill that could take away some of their ability to decide how to spend federal transportation and air pollution-reduction funds. Here’s a report on the issue from the Visalia Times-Delta newspaper in Tulare County, California.

- Legislation introduced in Congress last week would amend federal laws to allow ports nationwide to establish their own rules for implementing and enforcing environmental programs aimed at reducing emissions from diesel trucks. The (Torrance, CA) Daily Breeze has more here.

Public Transportation

- The American Public Transportation Association has a report that makes “The Case for Business Investment in Public Transportation.” It also looks at the state of the industry, existing funding sources and future funding projections.

- Mass Transit magazine has an interview this month with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood in which he discusses transit and high-speed rail. The magazine also talks to former Wisconsin Gov. Tommy Thompson.

- A recent report from the Transportation Research Board’s National Cooperative Highway Research Program looks at “State DOT Public Transportation Performance Measures: State of the Practice and Future Needs.” In a nationwide survey the NCHRP found that 30 out of 43 responding states have statewide public transportation goals in place and 15 indicated they are using performance measures to track progress toward those goals. The report highlights several states with notable practices including New Mexico, which uses a funding distribution index to reward public transportation providers that perform better, and Florida, where measures related to cost efficiency and project costs are informally used in funding decisions, along with qualitative assessments such as the level of community support, the public transportation agency’s past performance, a project’s overall viability, and its potential ability to compete with other national projects.

- Detroit’s plans to shift course from planning a new light-rail line to becoming a leader in bus rapid transit are dissected in recent posts from The Transport Politic and Streetsblog Capitol Hill (see here and here). The Transport Politic headline called it a “failure of municipal ambition.”

- Streetsblog also recently took a look at Chicago’s plans for BRT. The Windy City is currently participating in a two-year pilot project to use highway shoulders to move certain buses more quickly on the congested Stevenson Expressway (I-55), Transportation Issues Daily reported last month.

- A group called the Institute for Transportation & Development Policy has published a report called “Recapturing Global Leadership in Bus Rapid Transit: A Survey of Select U.S. Cities,” which argues that the process by which transit projects are selected is rigged in favor of rail projects and biased against bus and road projects.

- Streetsblog Capitol Hill recently looked at “How Salt Lake City Became a Leader in Transit-Oriented Development.”

High-Speed Rail

- As 2011 winds down, some are writing high-speed rail’s epitaph. Will Oremus on Slate.com offers this reason why HSR’s future is in doubt: “Rather than focus on the few corridors that need high-speed rail lines the most, the Obama administration doled out half a billion dollars here and half a billion there, a strategy better-suited to currying political support than to addressing real infrastructure problems.”

- Yonah Freemark on the Transport Politic blog writes about California’s high-speed rail struggles: “Despite an excellent proposal and significant state support, the project cannot hope to attract private investors without a larger commitment of aid from Washington.” A larger commitment of aid
seems increasingly unlikely in the near future, particularly with some House Republicans calling for an independent audit of ridership and cost projections for the proposed project.

- Public Policy Consultant Ken Orski in recent editions of his Innovation Newsbriefs weighed in on two recent Congressional hearings on high-speed rail, one which featured Transportation Secretary LaHood offering a defense of the administration’s HSR program and the other at which the California HSR project was debated. Orski’s newsbriefs can be read here and here.

Smart Growth/Sustainability

- Maryland Gov. Martin O’Malley recently signed an executive order which supporters say is a long-overdue effort to bring the state’s disparate Smart Growth programs under one umbrella with a standard set of rules and which opponents describe as a naked power grab aimed at concentrating power in Annapolis that takes away the property rights of rural Marylanders. The Washington Post, The Baltimore Sun and Transportation Nation all have coverage of the debate.

- State transportation agencies can get some help on integrating sustainability into their performance measurement programs from a new guidebook from the Transportation Research Board’s National Cooperative Highway Research Program.

- The Partnership for Sustainable Communities (an interagency partnership between the departments of Housing and Urban Development and Transportation and the Environmental Protection Agency) along with the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a report this fall that looks at how federal livability principles can be applied to rural communities.

- Jonathan Maus of the website BikePortland.org recently interviewed U.S. Assistant Secretary of Transportation for Policy Polly Trottenberg. He asked her whether DOT is trying to have it both ways by supporting both a major highway-widening mega-project like the Interstate 5 Columbia River Crossing and initiatives to improve livability and sustainability around the country. The TIGER program and NTSB’s proposed cell phone ban are among the other topics addressed.

Other Infrastructure

- The American Society of Civil Engineers has a new report in their “Failure to Act” series which shows that the nation’s drinking water and wastewater infrastructure is aging and failing and that investment is not keeping up with the needs. If these trends continue, the report suggests, the resulting gap will only widen through 2040. Pipes will leak, new facilities required to meet stringent environmental goals will be delayed, operation and maintenance will become more expensive and waters will be polluted. Offsetting these negative consequences will require spending more on existing technologies, investing to develop new technologies and then implementing them, and changing patterns in where and how we live, the ASCE says. The organization’s previous report on surface transportation infrastructure can be read here. You can also read my blog post about the report here.

- A Senate Environment and Public Works Subcommittee held a hearing last week on “Our Nation’s Water Infrastructure: Challenges and Opportunities.” You can read opening statements from the witnesses, which included ASCE President-Elect Greg DiLoreto, here.

Looking Back at 2011

- AASHTO lists their top 10 2011 transportation topics most popular with readers of their Weekly Transportation Report.

- Larry Ehl over at Transportation Issues Daily has a blog post looking back on “All of Your Favorite Federal Transportation Issues Moments of 2011.”

- 2011 was a big year for natural disasters and impacts to infrastructure. The U.S. Department of Transportation announced last month it was sending $215 million in emergency relief to 34 states and three territories to help relieve a backlog in needed road and bridge repairs. But that’s just a
fraction of the $2 billion in aid that states requested, Dan Vock of Stateline reported recently [132].

This press release from the U.S. DOT [133] has a complete list of emergency relief allocations by state and disaster.

Outlook for 2012

- The American Road and Transportation Builders Association expects that the highway and bridge construction market will contract 6 percent in 2012 to $72.6 billion from $77 billion in 2011. The markets for subway and light-rail construction are projected to be down 16 percent, according to the ARTBA’s annual transportation construction forecast [134].

- The global rating agency Fitch Ratings [135] predicts that widespread negative rating actions are unlikely for U.S. transportation interests in 2012. The agency expects U.S. ports and toll roads to have rating stability and stagnant at best growth for airports. Fitch gives GARVEE (grant anticipation revenue vehicle) bonds a negative outlook due to uncertainty about the future of the federal program.

- Politico reports that the Senate Commerce Committee plans to take up legislation to create a national infrastructure bank early in 2012.

Presidential Election: The Transportation Nation blog reported recently [136] on what 2012 Republican Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney has been saying lately about his plans for financing infrastructure investment if elected (they include borrowing and tolls). The blog later highlighted [137] additional comments made by Romney at a Charleston, South Carolina town hall event. Transportation Nation also looked at [138] Newt Gingrich’s record on transportation. The Los Angeles Times meanwhile recently looked back [139] on Texas Gov. Rick Perry’s failed Trans-Texas Corridor project.

- Truckinginfo.com has a look at “Trends to Watch in 2012: Washington Outlook.” [140]

- Progressive Railroading offers their “Rail Outlook 2012: Freight Rail” [141] and “Rail Outlook 2012: Passenger Rail.” [142]

And Finally...

- Bloomberg Businessweek had an interesting interview earlier this month with six transportation experts including former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer, who co-chairs the National Transportation Policy Project at the Bipartisan Policy Center. They discuss the small topic of “How to Fix World Transportation.” [143] Among the areas covered: public-private partnerships, transportation demand management, congestion pricing and intelligent transportation systems.

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