Transportation has been a mostly neglected issue on the presidential campaign trail this year. That has left media organizations and political and transportation analysts to try to fill the void in differentiating where President Barack Obama and Gov. Mitt Romney stand on transportation issues and what the election of one or the other might mean for state governments. With a week to go before the nation chooses a chief executive who may determine the future of transportation for decades to come, here’s a reading guide on the candidates.

The Associated Press’ recent “Why It Matters” series looked at where the candidates stand on a number of issues, including infrastructure. AP’s Jason Keyser breaks down their perspectives thusly: “President Barack Obama has favored stimulus-style infrastructure spending plans, talking up highway, bridge and rail repairs as job creators, and pushed for innovations like high-speed rail and a national infrastructure bank to finance projects with the help of private capital. But Republican opposition to increased spending and taxes has blunted many such plans. Mitt Romney favors less involvement by the federal government in infrastructure, preferring to let states lead the way. Romney shuns the idea that public-works spending is a good way to jumpstart the economy, saying decisions on worthy projects should be based on need and potential returns. Romney also wants to privatize Amtrak by ending federal subsidies for the money-losing passenger rail system. He’s OK with borrowing to pay for megaprojects if there’s a revenue stream to pay the money back, like tolls or port fees.”

Politico’s Kathryn A. Wolfe wrote recently about Romney’s transportation advisers, which include many Bush administration officials: “The team is heavy on a privatization agenda, dovetailing with the Bush administration’s flagship stances spanning different modes. That would include an attempt to privatize some air traffic controllers and Amtrak, as well as a push for more toll roads and public-private partnerships for highways.

President Obama had a couple of interesting things to say about transportation in his recent interview with the Des Moines Register editorial board (the one the Administration initially wanted to make off-the-record) including this: “My hope is, is that there’s a recognition that now is a great time to make infrastructure improvements all across the country. And we can pull up some of the money that we know we’re going to be spending over the next decade to put people back to work right now at a time when contractors are dying for work and interest rates are really low.”

Infrastructure was also an issue that came up during President Obama and Gov. Romney’s recent interviews with The Plain Dealer newspaper in Cleveland. Romney told the newspaper: “Our infrastructure’s crumbling. It was built in the 1950s and 1960s, it had an estimated 50-year life, and you’re seeing a dramatic need to repair what we have and to expand our system to remove the choke points that are making it more difficult for our goods to travel across the nation.” The President offered this: “We’ve got a whole bunch of deferred maintenance right now, and the construction industry is still weak ... I think that increasingly not only experts, but also voters, recognize the old urban-suburban-exurban divide doesn’t really make sense anymore. When you look at states here in the Midwest, cities are the economic engines for the suburbs.”

The party platforms adopted at the Democratic and Republican conventions this summer address infrastructure to varying degrees. The Democratic Platform takes credit for MAP-21, the
transportation authorization bill passed by Congress this summer: “Roads, bridges, rail and public transit systems, airports, ports and sewers are all critical to economic growth, as they enable businesses to grow. That’s why President Obama and Democrats in Congress have enacted infrastructure investments that will sustain our Highway Trust Fund and provide states, U.S. territories and communities with two years of funding to build needed infrastructure.” The platform also notes: “The president has proposed to go substantially further, including a significant up-front investment in our infrastructure followed by sustained increases in investment paid for with part of the savings from winding down our overseas wars, together with reforms that will better leverage government dollars and target significant projects.” The Republican platform also takes some credit for MAP-21 noting it “included some key reforms. It will shorten the project approval process, eliminate unnecessary programs and give states more flexibility to address their particular needs. It is a return to the principles of federalism, and it contains not a single earmark.” But the platform says those reforms should be followed by reduction of environmental regulations to further expedite construction projects. In addition, the GOP platform calls for the elimination of funding for Amtrak passenger rail service and stopping highway project money from being used on public transit, bike and pedestrian programs. It laments the Recovery Act’s emphasis on “shovel-ready projects rather than fundamental structural improvements.” The Republican platform offers this on the state and federal roles in providing future transportation funding: “Interstate infrastructure has long been a federal responsibility shared with the States, and a renewed federal-State partnership and new public-private partnerships are urgently needed to maintain and modernize our country’s travel lifelines to facilitate economic growth and job creation ... Securing sufficient funding for the Highway Trust Fund remains a challenge given the debt and deficits and the need to reduce spending. Republicans will make hard choices and set priorities, and infrastructure will be among them.” The Republicans also make clear their opposition to a Vehicle Miles Traveled tax or similar funding mechanisms, which they say “would involve governmental monitoring of every car and truck in the nation.”

- In a recent op-ed for The Baltimore Sun, former Maryland Governor (and 2002 CSG President) Parris Glendening and Deron Lovaas of the Natural Resources Defense Council wrote that Romney’s sustainable development and smart growth policies as Massachusetts Governor differed significantly from those he has supported as a presidential candidate. The aforementioned Republican platform claims the Obama Administration has replaced “civil engineering with social engineering as it pursues an exclusively urban vision of dense housing and government transit.”
- Back in September, Larry Ehl on the Transportation Issues Daily blog had an analysis of Republican Vice Presidential Nominee Paul Ryan’s record on transportation issues. The post incorporates a piece by Gary Hoitsma, editor of the Washington Letter on Transportation and Managing Associate at the Carmen Group, a DC-based business and government consulting firm. Hoitsma writes: “The Ryan budget was a statement of an alternative commitment to find a future path for transportation outside of the deficit-spending rut that federal transportation programs are currently in ...While tax increases are currently off the table politically, it could be argued that viewed in a larger context the Ryan budget or something like it holds the potential of actually advancing the kind of “come-to-Jesus” moment that transportation advocates have long wanted in terms of building support for raising user fee revenues.”
- The Washington Post had an article in August looking at “What Romney’s run with the Big Dig tells us about how he’d manage America.” It details the former Massachusetts Governor’s oversight of the massive Boston tunnel project.
- And then there is this from Clifford Lynch, principal of Memphis-based C.F. Lynch & Associates, a provider of logistics management advisory services: “The Congressional Budget Office has estimated that we need to spend an additional $20 billion annually just to maintain the current, inadequate (transportation) system. That sounds like a staggering sum until you consider the alternative. The American Society of Civil Engineers has estimated that failing to invest in the country’s bridges and roads will cost us $3.1 trillion in lost GDP growth by 2020 ...
seems to grasp is the importance of a seamless, well-functioning national transportation infrastructure. Abraham Lincoln understood it when he encouraged the building of the first transcontinental railroad. Dwight Eisenhower got it when he envisioned the interstate highway system. But given Congress's apparent inability to make sense out of this issue, whoever our new president is, I'm a little pessimistic about this problem being resolved any time soon. I simply don't think either party has a good handle on the issue.”

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