

Still stuck in the '50s

Maryland and the nation need to move out of the past and adopt a 21st-century transportation policy

By Kristi Horvath

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If longer commutes, heavier congestion, increased pollution and greater dependence on oil seem inevitable, there's a good reason: These ills all stem from the misguided way our elected officials fund transportation in America. It's time to establish a 21st-century transportation policy to pay for 21st-century priorities.

Every day brings more news about our struggling transportation system: wearisome traffic delays, soaring gasoline prices and shrinking funds for transportation projects. This week, Maryland officials announced they would cut back transportation spending plans by \$1.1 billion because of a drop in state revenues. And federal Transportation Secretary [Mary E. Peters](#) announced recently that the federal highway trust fund will come up \$8.3 billion short in a matter of weeks.

The state and federal shortages come in part from Americans choosing to drive less because of high gas prices, thus generating less gas tax revenue to replenish transportation funds. This means that work on road and bridge projects will be halted until funding can be secured.

It's hard to remember that our transportation system, now such a source of frustration to us, was once an engine of American progress. Railroads opened the West, and automobiles brought mobility to a footloose generation after World War II.

Nowadays, commuters in the metropolitan Baltimore region lose an average of 44 hours a year in traffic delays - more than an entire workweek and four times as much as in 1982. Furthermore, transportation is the major reason for our addiction to expensive foreign oil, consuming two out of every three barrels that we import, and is the fastest-growing source of global warming pollution.

Since the completion of President [Dwight D. Eisenhower's](#) 1956 vision of an interstate system to link our major cities, transportation policy has been driven more by congressional earmarks than by consideration of how to improve mobility and support other national priorities. Expansive

new highway projects such as Maryland's Intercountry Connector undercut efforts to curb global warming and reduce our fossil fuel addiction, leaving little funding to repair crumbling roads and bridges.

Currently, states receive highway funds based on outdated criteria in which more driving generates more in gas taxes and thus garners more federal dollars. It's a variation of the old rule that "no good deed goes unpunished": States that do their part to reduce America's oil dependence and global warming by promoting alternatives to driving lose out on federal money.

Instead of reducing transportation funding to states that are doing right, the federal government should reward states and localities that reduce gas consumption and miles driven by helping them more easily fund public transportation projects. Light rail, rapid bus transit, commuter rail, high-speed intercity rail and other forms of public transit are energy efficient, encourage development patterns that require less driving, and help cut pollution that leads to global warming. A recent report by the Maryland Public Interest Research Group shows that public transit around the country saved 3.4 billion gallons of oil in 2006 and prevented 26 million tons of greenhouse gases.

Americans are eager for better public transit options. In fact, 53 percent of Americans tell pollsters they would like to take more public transportation if it were available near where they live and work.

Giving citizens the transportation choices they want will require Congress to make changes. Since 1956, federal, state and local governments have spent nine times more on highways than on public transportation. This ratio has improved in recent years, but not fast enough. And President Bush proposes to take us back in time by cutting transit money, slashing Amtrak's budget and raiding the transit trust fund to make up for the shortage in the highway fund. Such cuts would move the country in exactly the wrong direction.

Congress will have a golden opportunity to set the country on the right course when the current transportation authorization bill expires next year. Public leaders should revamp transportation funding criteria to expand our public transit system; institute a "fix it first" approach to repair our crumbling highway and bridge infrastructure before financing unnecessary new highway projects; and eliminate a system of earmarks that assigns transportation projects based on political muscle rather than community needs.

Instead of simply reauthorizing the transportation act with higher spending, Congress must reinvent how it funds transportation.

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