HNTB

Our Roads and Bridges Have Proven Their Value in This Pandemic. Let's Support Them with the Investments They Deserve.

Before 2020, we all had grown accustomed to the frequent appearance on our doorsteps of people who made life easier: mail carriers, parcel delivery drivers, meal and grocery delivery people, caregivers and many others. But, in the coronavirus era, these once-routine arrivals have been transformed into *events*, and the people putting themselves at risk for us, into *heroes*. Those individuals, like so many others in American society, deserve our gratitude and respect.

In a similar way, the current national crisis is shining a spotlight on the rarely appreciated highways, roads and bridges that keep us connected to the people, services and goods we need. Each of the 4 million miles of roads in the U.S. serves a vital purpose, but highways serve as the backbone of our transportation system and our economy. In fact, more than 70% of the nation's freight — essential goods, medicines and food — is moved on highways, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

Fortunately, our highways, roads and bridges have managed to perform adequately during this pandemic. Most people have only experienced minor supply chain disruptions or delivery delays, if any. We can thank the many state and local construction crews who have kept working on America's roads and highways to keep us safe and the economy alive. But, let's be clear: America's beloved system is running on borrowed time because our already strained national transportation funding approach is beginning to buckle. Part of the problem is prolonged underinvestment in preserving antiquated "backbone" systems. For example, the Interstate Highway System is more than 50 years old now, with many deteriorating bridges and pavement sections. Such deficiencies and others could worsen dangerously in the months ahead if we fail to step up to the emerging funding crisis.

Why is the coronavirus creating havoc in transportation funding? Because it's disrupting multiple mechanisms that governments use to provide such funding. At the state level, fuel tax revenues have plummeted due to "shelter in place" directives that cut personal travel in half. Entities that rely on dedicated revenues from sales taxes also are hurting due to suppressed consumer spending. More broadly, revenues generated by income taxes, property taxes, motor vehicle licenses and fees also have been crushed by the pandemic, as millions of people lose their incomes and forego purchases of new vehicles.

Adding another hurdle, state and local entities may find it hard to ask voters for more transportation funding in November. The pandemic is disrupting efforts to get such measures on ballots and, even then, voters may temporarily hesitate to support any new funding due to economic uncertainty. An estimated $130 billion in transportation-related ballot measures intended for this fall already have been delayed. This is truly unfortunate, because such measures generally are highly successful. Last November, for example, voters approved nearly 90 percent of all such initiatives, a demonstration of the value they place on an effective transportation system.

Already, responding to state budget imperatives, transportation agencies are furloughing workers and pausing or canceling projects representing billions of dollars. And some agencies are being asked to issue new bonds for the purpose of freeing up existing capital for re-distribution to other state needs.

It's important to understand that 67 percent of all transportation dollars are generated at the state and local levels, meaning that fully two-thirds of our nation's transportation funding has been compromised by the coronavirus crisis. Unless the federal government steps in soon, we must brace ourselves for a transportation system that is less reliable, less safe and less able to maintain the vital connections that are keeping us fed and supplied during crises like the one we're in.

In Washington, currently there are various proposals being offered for boosting transportation funding, mainly through recovery-focused bills or more substantive, long-term funding packages. These proposals would provide much needed funding and stability for our nation's planning organizations, transportations agencies, engineers and builders to allow them to advance and deliver critical projects and programs.

Is there a viable solution for bringing financial relief to struggling state transportation agencies this year? Yes, and it is crucial that Congress act now and swiftly to address a looming problem. The existing federal surface transportation authorization — the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act — will expire this September. Congress must take some form of action to keep the vital "final third" of transportation funds flowing to the states.

Now more than ever, it is paramount for Congress to replace or reauthorize and extend the FAST Act, ideally within weeks rather than months, and include a substantial amount of additional funding in the first year to deliver immediate relief to state transportation agencies. Through this type of measure, Congress would provide a long-term authorization for five or six years, greatly enhancing states' ability to plan, finance and execute their vital plans and programs.

We have learned an important lesson from this pandemic: that the ordinary people who bring us the goods, food and services we need are actually extraordinary — even heroic — and irreplaceable in a functioning society. Equally, we have learned that the highways, roads and bridges that enable these activities — and which we often take for granted — are vitally important and worthy of our support.

It's our responsibility to keep our transportation infrastructure strong, not just for the value it delivers today, but for the security and economic opportunities it will provide to our future generations. Let's come together to invest, build and renew in the face of a historic challenge.