



DON PHILLIPS

Transportation crisis? We'll worry about that tomorrow

We either spend now or forfeit our economic future

Consider this blunt statement from a new study on transportation in the United States: "The reorganization of the U.S. and continental grid is being driven by the private sector in response to global economic demands with no public policy framework. There is no national policy, and no apparent coordination with Canada and Mexico, to guide its direction."

In other words, when it comes to freight transportation, the U.S. federal government doesn't have a clue and isn't acting with the slightest planning or intelligence.

That wasn't the only message from a new study called "Transportation: Invest In Our Future," a report that is far more important than its mere 93 pages would indicate. Despite its polite words, and despite the relatively poor attendance at a Washington press conference where it was released, it is a straightforward warning about the direction this country is headed in ground and sea transportation.

The message was simple: Start spending on transportation big time, or forfeit the future of economic development to China, India, and other countries that understand the value of mobility.

What is interesting is that it was produced by an organization that was once called the "highway lobby," the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. In truth, the organization has long supported rail and all other forms of transportation.

Even more interesting was who else was represented at the press conference and in the report. The railroad industry and the trucking industry sat side by side. Environmentalists and industrialists signed off on the same recommendations. The American Automobile Association was present. It was as if every form of surface transportation, shipper, and public interest group was saying the same thing: Start spending real money on transportation or face the economic and social consequences.

Reporters attending the press conference were, as always, skeptical. I got a laugh when I asked if the truckers and railroaders would leave the room and immediately start a battle over truck size and weight. Ha, ha ... Bill Graves, president of the American Trucking Association, laughed with everyone else, then he turned serious. "I hope the answer is never," he said. "Too much is at stake." Graves added that it is more important to win the battle over gridlock than it is to stage yet another fight with railroads. "We must be willing to give a little to get a lot," Graves said.

It was at this point that I began to realize this was more than just another special-interest press conference. These were people who understood that the crisis in transportation is here and now.

Commuter rail was represented at the news conference, but not Amtrak. However, the report stressed that a major increase in intercity passenger rail service, and a doubling of transit ridership, is vital to maintaining human mobility, as is an 80-percent increase in intercity highway lane-miles. "Passenger and freight rail must continue to grow," the report notes, "and, where necessary to maintain the efficiency of freight movement and expand passenger rail service, public investment should be provided to establish additional and separate infrastructure."

Unfortunately, none of this will happen any time soon. President George Bush has promised to veto any spending bill for transporta-

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tion that goes beyond his recommendations. That means that transportation next year would fall \$2.5 billion behind the amount necessary to just stay even. By 2010, the transportation budget would be \$18 billion behind the break-even point. Bush's budget would allow transportation to deteriorate rather than grow at a time when major growth is needed. He also, once again, wants to kill Amtrak while offering no alternative plan that makes any sense.

Don't get me wrong. I don't think the Democrats would do much better — at least not until transportation collapses into gridlock.

Meanwhile, massive highway and rail building programs are under way in Europe. The first phase of a new French-German high-speed line is open, and the two longest rail tunnels in the Alps — one to become the longest rail tunnel in the world — are complete or nearing completion. China is in the midst of a large-scale transportation improvement program, and already has produced (gasp) one of the safest and most efficient airline systems on earth. Iran (gasp) is building new railroads as if its future depends on it.

These countries, and others, understand their future depends on mobility. From the United States comes the sound of snoring.

There is no political leadership at the federal level. Even the federal officials who understand the problem can do nothing more than talk. There is no extra money.

Everyone at the AASHTO press conference attempted to be polite. But it didn't take reporters much to scratch beneath the surface and see how upset they were. I felt sorry for them. They were facing mostly specialty reporters who write for well-informed readers. There were no TV cameras. No major newspapers showed up. The big news organizations with access to the majority of the public are out covering war and electoral politics.

Pete Ruane, longtime president of the American Road Builders and Transportation Association was blunt. He had no need for polite language. When asked how soon the crisis would hit, he said, "I believe we're already there. The crisis is with us." I

DON PHILLIPS, a newspaper reporter for more than four decades, writes this exclusive monthly column for TRAINS.

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