

Help North Carolina Become the Good Roads State Again

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We all know that this is a time of tremendous challenge and opportunity for North Carolina's transportation system. You are not alone. America's entire physical infrastructure – roads and rails, airports and seaports, inland waterways and the skyways -- the proud legacy of generations past, needs repair and replacement as well as expansion to handle future growth.

What's at stake is simple and stark:

- If we fail to address our infrastructure challenges, we will lose jobs and industries to other nations.
- If we fail to act, we will pollute our air and destroy the free, mobile way of life we cherish.
- If we fail to increase investment, we will see more senseless deaths on our transportation system.

Without your action in North Carolina, and very importantly, without your action in Washington, it's going to get much worse. The country has a transportation system that is overworked, under-funded and increasingly unsafe, without a plan to make it better.

North Carolina can't afford to wait to act. And, the only way to convince decision-makers in this country to put money where their mouths are, is to bring together a broad coalition – business, labor and transportation industry stakeholders – and to demand with many voices the same thing: a first-class transportation system.

In order to return North Carolina to being the Good Roads – or more aptly the Good Transportation State – to address congestion in cities and connections in rural areas, to move the economy, it is going to take serious work. So I challenge you to take two messages with you out to people across the state, and especially those who aren't true believers in the power of investing in infrastructure.

1. There's no free lunch. To meet this nation's transportation needs, more resources are required.

North Carolina needs more than \$1 billion this year just to maintain its roads, and this is a time when state funding for highway construction increased just 3 percent between 2002 and 2006 while construction costs increased 80 percent.

How do we fill the resource gap so we can invest in infrastructure and grow our economy? More revenues are required. No matter the financing mechanism – debt or equity, public or private, more revenues, more public funding, are absolutely necessary.

The U.S. Chamber believes that when it comes to funding and financing at the Federal level, every option must be considered to address the enormous problems of the aging transportation infrastructure. That means all of the revenue sources that maintain and expand our existing networks and all of the financing options for projects must be on the table.

There is a clear difference between what this country is investing and what is needed to modernize and expand the transportation system. So we've got to fix what we have and then, if we want a new road, a new runway or a new transit system, we've got to buy it. Like I said, there's no free lunch.

2. It's not just about the money.

There is a good reason that some states don't have faith in the Federal government. It is because it is time to fundamentally change Federal transportation policies and programs. Certainly, chronic underinvestment is a major contributing factor to the problems across all modes of transportation. However, the public must trust and have confidence that transportation programs and the agencies that administer them will deliver real solutions to real problems; otherwise they will not support increased investment.

It all has to start with a multi- and intermodal vision that supports economic growth and our quality of life, followed by a plan to make that vision a reality and a commitment by our elected officials to fund that plan. The U.S. Chamber's vision is one where facilities are maintained, travel options plentiful and reliable, freight movement valued, safety assured, transportation decisions made based on need and return on investment, and regulatory policies rational.

The bottom line: people and goods need to get where they need to go quickly, reliably, safely and cost-effectively.

Of course, we can have the best plan in the world, but no results if it can't be delivered. Project delivery times are 13 years on average. Lawsuits can block improvements indefinitely, and while the clock ticks, costs go up and up, reducing taxpayer value for their dollars. We have to make decisions about projects and then get them done while still respecting environmental and community needs.

We also must ensure that public dollars are spent wisely. It's time to develop a sensible mix of projects based on actual needs and not on politics or ideologies, which is easier said than done. And both states and the Federal government should end the practice of diverting money intended for infrastructure to other programs, which breaks trust with the taxpayers who expect their user fees to go toward their intended purposes.

To address our transportation challenges, we also have to fix our policies and programs. So, no, it's not just about the money.

We can succeed – North Carolina can succeed -- only if we act as one. In North Carolina and other states, as well as in Washington, we're all working for the same vision and we all believe that it is time to increase public investment in infrastructure. It's not going to be easy. But it can – and it must – happen.

NC Go! is doing great work statewide and is a tremendous model for other states. Similarly, the U.S. Chamber leads a broad-based national coalition of business, labor and transportation industry interests called the Americans for Transportation Mobility coalition. In a few weeks we will formally launch our Better, Faster, Safer campaign – the full court press for the maximum, and maximized – public investment in highways and transit in the next federal authorization bill. By being a part of it, you can make a difference in Federal legislation that is so critical to North Carolina.

The good news is that if all transportation and infrastructure stakeholders come to the table - all modes, all industries, builders, carriers, users and shippers alike – we can make a difference. Every organization has a responsibility to advocate for its particular interest. But all of us – public and private groups who design, build, maintain, operate and finance infrastructure, carriers that move people and goods, and the users – shippers and travelers - have a shared responsibility to advance the national interest.

The U.S. Chamber is ready to lead the way. So here are the three things that you can do today to make a real difference:

- First, call your representative or senator and demand that they act now to fix the Highway Trust Fund deficit.
- Second, join the Americans for Transportation Mobility Coalition and help us advocate for a well-funded highway and transit authorization bill in 2009.
- And, finally, add your voices to the Chamber's Let's Rebuild America campaign to emphasize the importance of investment in the physical platform of our economy – transportation, energy and communications infrastructure.

The time to get serious about investing in our nation's infrastructure to modernize and expand it is now.