

Economic Growth Requires Good Highways

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In the past years our great highway system has seriously deteriorated due to the lack of maintenance money. Where have we gone wrong—not those of us who spend our lives working for better roads—but this nation at-large? What happened on our roadway journey across America? Where was the detour? At which juncture did we decide that billions of taxpayer dollars that have been invested in our surface transportation system could simply be forfeited?

What about connecting those farms to markets? A crop of tomatoes leaves California's Sacramento Valley and arrives at its market, fit not for the produce shelves of the local safeway, but only for a catsup factory. Eggs arrive at the roadside diner already scrambled. Truckers shell out thousands upon thousands of dollars to replace some of those 18 wheels and tires that probably would have lasted longer on smooth road surfaces.

Can we even start to put a price tag on these costs?

Somewhere between the warehouse and the consumer, highway robbery is taking place. And the bandits are just as faceless as those in an Grade B western you ever saw.

Somewhere between the grandkids and grandparents, there's a stretch of neglected roadway, an aging bridge ready to collapse, a missing guard-rail or improperly banked curve—robbing us of more than we could ever fix a price tag to.

Where have we gone wrong?

TRIP and other organizations have tried to put some numbers on the consequences of bad roads. Our studies and reports have shown, for instance, that driving on rough and broken roads costs the average American motorist some \$190 dollars in excess costs annually.

I personally feel the \$190 average may be a bit low. Three weeks ago my Japanese import took on the Great American Pothole, in Bethesda, Maryland, a suburb of Washington. The pothole won.

I limped into the gas station with both tires on the left side shredded. The attendant looked at the damage and said, "it must have been a big one."

The repair bill was worthy of the pothole, \$120 for two tires and

I still may need a set of shocks and a front end re-alignment. So I'm well on the way to making the national average in excess costs for 1985, and the pothole season has just begun.

And how about safety?

TRIP has shown that safety improvements can prevent between 42 and 45% of all vehicle accidents in America each year.

We've appealed to the pocketbook mentality of the American taxpayer by explaining that a whopping, \$26 billion can be saved each year in this country if we take care of minor, routine maintenance along our roads before they crumble and have to be totally rebuilt.

We see the Congress play politics-as-usual with more than \$7 billion of our money—already collected and designated for completion and rehabilitation of the interstate highway system.

And it takes a major effort on the part of industry and the constituency to pry the funds loose. And when the pressure rose to the breaking point the Congress did the only thing it could do—it turned the taxpayers' money over to the highway program, months and even years late. All of us will help pay the penalty for that.

Now, many folks will be inclined to thank Congress for its wisdom and rightful deed. President Reagan will soon sign the Interstate cost estimate legislation, no doubt with a good word for the fine display of bipartisanship by the Congress.

And seven months from now—barring some new miracle—the Congress will begin debate again, behind schedule, on the apportionment for the next fiscal year. And the disruptive cycle will begin all over again.

And we see state legislatures taking the politically expedient route and refusing to increase user fees that haven't changed in decades, or have changed slightly in comparison to the costs of just maintaining the road system we have in place.

We see states collecting taxes from motorists and putting those dollars into funding rail transit systems or running registration bureaus or simply balancing the general budgets.

America's roads are the victims of irresponsibility—not just age and weather and wear. They've never been more critical to our economy, never been relied upon by more motorists, by more consumers and users—yet never more neglected.

We see another dark cloud on the horizon. It is now predicted by the Congressional budget office and others that the Federal Highway Trust Fund, the user-free bank account that has been providing what funding there is for road construction and upkeep, will be in serious trouble—perhaps bankrupt—by 1990.

And even if Congress steps in to prevent its bankruptcy it will have to beat back those who are already suggesting a "raid" on the fund to

help pay for social programs, finance transit operations or to help cut away at the federal deficit.

What's happening here?

We need to help our elected representatives understand that there is a direct relationship between the quality of our roadways and the way we cast our votes.

Tax-cutting measures aimed at short-term popularity fade in the light of increasingly deteriorated roads.

If they cannot respond to the importance of responsible funding on the basis of the RAW, compelling needs that are so apparent all across America, maybe our elected representatives should be reminded of the essential role that our road and bridge network plays in sustaining a healthy economy.

More than 90% of everything that is manufactured moves at some point along our roadways before it reaches the consumer. New plant locations, expanded warehouse facilities, regional headquarters offices and factories don't happen where workers traverse congested roadways.

Tourism does not take place where highways become hazard-ways, where roads and parking lots are indistinguishable, where the pain of getting there diminishes the joy of going.

And, if our elected leaders think they are doing us some big favor by avoiding costly, albeit necessary, roadwork, maybe we need to remind them that every \$10 million spent on the repairs and construction of roads and bridges creates nearly 600 jobs and generates nearly a half-million dollars in federal income taxes.

This ripples into some \$1.2 million in corporate and property taxes that go back to local states. It puts people on the payrolls and takes them off the welfare rolls.

A new study produced at Georgetown University says that the U.S. Economy has already missed out on more than \$350 billion in GNP growth during the past ten years because of underinvestment in both public and private capital improvements.

The same report calculates that \$2.80 in economic activity results from every \$1 invested in highway construction or repair.

The story here in Indiana is not unlike the one TRIP is telling all across the country. In our study released last December, in cooperation with Art Graham's Highways for Progress, and the Indiana State Chamber of Commerce, TRIP pointed out that a doubling of the highway program in this state would generate about 85 million in increased income and corporate tax revenues for the state. The same increase could generate more than 7,000 construction jobs.

California. A state with a long heritage of good roads and the state with perhaps the most mobile populace, is on the verge of a major crisis on its rural system.

TRIP's survey of 56 California counties—in which each county engineer participated—reveals that it would take the county governments 40 years to catch up with a mounting backlog of repairs—40,000 miles of county roads need resurfacing and 5,000 county-maintained bridges need repairs or replacement.

The bleak outlook for California's county system appears to be part of a continuing trend for rural highways in America.

The media, by the way, can be our strongest ally: simply because we are dealing with a legitimate and major news story, one that impacts on each and every American.

And our story must be told, there are no alternatives.

Congressman James Howard of New Jersey, in making the analogy about public concern for highway needs, tells about trying to get out the vote in his home district.

The congressman said he was worried about the attrition in turnout at the polls. So he took his own survey and his question was: "Do you think the poor turnout at the polls is because of ignorance or apathy?"

The first answer he got was: "Don't know, and I don't care."

We need to work hard at developing a new sense of awareness—among the nation at large and among our elected leaders, and we need to do it before it is too late.

There can be no room for ignorance or apathy when it comes to saving our highways.

We can proceed, with the certainty that our economic progress will grind to a halt when we no longer have safe and dependable roads to transport people and goods—and when we can no longer afford the necessary improvements.

This is my belief. The belief of a person whose midflight nightmares are not of a plane going down in flames, but of a Datsun going down for good in a pothole in Bethesda, Maryland. It's a belief that needs to become a cause, a cause you are invited to join.