

## **August 28, 2011 Richmond Times Dispatch Editorial:**

### **Investment in Infrastructure Paves the Way for Future Economic Competitiveness**

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Now that the debate on the debt ceiling has gone dormant, the talk in Washington has already shifted to who won and who lost that debate and how this will play in the 2012 Presidential election. While I can't deny the need to assess the fallout from the debt ceiling debate that captivated the country for most of the summer, there is another issue looming in Washington, which if no action is taken no one will come out victorious.

On September 30<sup>th</sup>, the current highway authorization bill, commonly referred to as SAFETEA-LU, will expire and spending on our nation's vital infrastructure will revert to what is allowed in the budget. Initially, this might seem like a non-issue. Spending on infrastructure won't stop completely and highway construction isn't tied to our national credit rating or to financial markets.

However, the ramifications of a failure to act would have a damaging impact on the current economy, the fragile job market and our future ability to compete in the global marketplace. I think we will all agree that fiscal responsibility is a virtue, and one that needs reintroduction north of the Potomac. But, infrastructure investment is not just a line item on an expense statement, it's a calculated plan for the success of our nation in the future and for the generations that follow us.

It's not unlike saving for your child's college education. The responsible approach is planning ahead for what will likely be the largest expense of their young lives. If you start saving when your child is an infant, that investment will eventually mature to the point where it can completely cover the cost of a good college education with minimal impact on your monthly budget. If you wait until your child is a junior in high school to start saving for their education, chances are you are going to be submitting a much larger portion of your income to that savings plan, and will also have to borrow to supplement what you couldn't save.

Our parents and grandparents decided in the 1950's to invest in our future. In 1956, President Eisenhower championed an act that created the Interstate Highway System. At the time it was meant to create a network of high speed, limited access roads that would facilitate the free flow of people, commerce and military assets around the country. Many of those structures have reached the end of their useful lives and are in desperate need of replacement and upgrades.

We have used up the investment of the generations that came before us, and now it's our turn to prepare the future for our children. Congestion in urban areas is getting worse. Moving products to ports for international shipment is becoming more of a chore as our infrastructure deteriorates. As a result businesses whether foreign or domestic no longer view the United States as an option for the location of manufacturing or research facilities. We are losing ground to China, and India who are spending 10% and 5%, respectively, of their GDP on infrastructure upgrades. By comparison the United States is currently spending 2%.

Just like a child coming out of college with student loans, we are leaving an infrastructure deficit for our children and their ability to generate growth and attract top jobs in the future will be at a significant disadvantage.

The good news is, the game is not over and we do have options. Currently in Congress there are two competing measures for highway reauthorization. One is Senator Boxer's bill that would reauthorize investment in infrastructure for two years. While Boxer's bill provides the minimum funding requirements, it is very difficult for VDOT and infrastructure construction companies to operate on a short-term reauthorization.

Conversely, Congressman Mica has introduced a bill that would provide six years of guaranteed funding and keeps gas tax revenues raised in Virginia from being shipped off to other states, but reduces our investment in infrastructure nationally by 30%. However, any reduction in spending should concern us and a 30% reduction in federal transportation investment in Virginia could result in a loss of up to 11,000 jobs.

Neither of these bills are perfect, but legislation rarely is, that is why we have the legislative process to work out our differences and do what is best for the country. But as a citizen you can help get this process moving. Contact your Congressman to let them know that you want to invest in the future of the United States. Let them know that we need a highway reauthorization bill that is long-term in nature, secures at least funding comparable to what we have now, and that they need to act before the September 30<sup>th</sup> deadline. If they come back with legislation that misses any of these three pieces, we are still in jeopardy of falling behind in our investments.