

The U.S. Transportation Opportunity

America's transportation policy should further the goal of energy independence.

AMERICANS ARE AT A historic moment when the choices that are made about how we build and rebuild our communities will determine whether we end up on the right or wrong side of history. The interrelationship of climate change, energy usage, infrastructure investments, and land use are irrefutable. An estimated 30 percent of carbon emissions and almost 70 percent of oil usage are attributable to the transportation sector. The land use patterns established over the past 50 years have added significantly to the carbon and energy increases.

Clearly, land use decisions are within the power of thousands of local municipalities across the country but, just as clearly, the federal government's choices on infrastructure investments will greatly influence local land use decisions.

Transportation infrastructure will be at the heart of any solution. We must make the investments necessary to repair and build the infrastructure that will help us reduce our reliance on oil, decrease greenhouse gas emissions, improve mobility, and enhance the country's economic competitiveness and quality of life.

To deal seriously with global energy demand and prices, climate change, unsustainable land use patterns, and significant infrastructure investment needs, the United States clearly needs a comprehensive national transportation strategy. Even a superficial glance at American policy over the last 50 years shows that, with the exception of the push to build the interstate highway system, there has been no comprehensive and coherent national strategy or vision for transportation.

America's transportation policy needs to further the goal of energy independence. In 1950, the United States was energy independent. But over the years, consumption of oil has increased—much of it going to the transportation sector—along with oil imports. We now depend heavily on oil imported from other countries, many of them hostile or indifferent. According to the U.S. Department of Energy (DoE), the transportation sector accounts for 29 percent of all energy consumed in the United States and drinks up 70 percent of the nation's total oil. Oil accounts for 97 percent of all energy consumed in transportation. We need to take action to reverse recent energy consumption trends—and transportation is a critical part of this.

Climate change is another important challenge that can be addressed, at least in part, by a better transportation policy. The transportation sector is an important contributor to climate change, constituting 30 percent of all CO₂ emissions. Between 1990 and 2006, transport sector emissions increased by more than 25 percent, accounting for one-half of total national growth in greenhouse gases. These trends have resulted directly from the transportation investment decisions we are making. While technology may improve gas mileage and reduce auto emissions, slowing growth in the number of vehicle-miles driven will also be crucial.

More and smarter investments will be needed. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, U.S. infrastructure systems get an average grade of D. The failure of the levees in New Orleans and the bridge in Minneapolis are major

reminders of our dependence on good infrastructure.

But the United States must do more—which means it needs to invest in new, more sustainable transportation systems that will help America meet the challenges of the 21st century. Smarter transportation investments, coupled with better land use policies, can encourage more compact land use patterns, helping to reduce driving and associated emissions. Transportation planners have found that residents of higher-density communities drive less and use alternative modes more. Many studies have shown that increases in density and mixed uses encourage transit use and walking. ULI's recent publication *Growing Cooler*, for example, estimates that more compact land use patterns can reduce vehicle-miles traveled by significant amounts relative to sprawl.

The Census Bureau projects an increase of 140 million people by 2050. Traditional gateway cities like New York and Los Angeles continue to add population, while cities such as Charlotte, North Carolina; Atlanta, Georgia; Orlando, Florida; Las Vegas, Nevada; Seattle, Washington; and others also are growing rapidly. It is hard to imagine that these communities will build hundreds of thousands of housing units following the same sprawling development trends of years past—pushing people farther out, saddling them with ever-longer commutes, pushing up gas consumption, and incurring ever larger infrastructure costs.

Transportation policy is inextricably linked to energy consumption, climate change, and land use issues, and it holds the key to enhancing



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mobility, economic competitiveness, and quality of life in the United States in this time of remarkable change. The authorization of the next surface transportation bill, scheduled for this September, provides an opportunity to rethink fundamentally the way the U.S. transportation system is planned, built, and funded. With the 2005 funding authorization under the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU) of \$244 billion through September, the bill represents the largest public works expenditure of the federal government, and leverages and directs billions of additional dollars in state and local infrastructure investments. In recent years, the federal transportation program increasingly has been without a national or strategic focus, and consequently has become a magnet for earmarks and other ad hoc programs.

There is a growing commitment to ensuring that the authorization *not* be a continuation of business as usual, but rather that it establish a new strategic national infrastructure investment blueprint. That blueprint needs to reaffirm traditional infrastructure goals of safety, mobility, and economic competitiveness, while also recognizing transportation's critical role in promoting energy independence, reducing greenhouse gas reductions, and promoting responsible land use patterns. Infrastructure investment choices will have a strong impact on climate change, energy dependence, and land use patterns for decades to come.

Because national transportation and infrastructure policy are strongly linked with the Urban Land Institute's two other core priority areas of sustainability and housing, and are integral to ULI's

mission to provide leadership in "the responsible use of land and in creating and sustaining thriving communities worldwide," ULI is launching an important initiative to engage in critical discussions about the future of transportation policy. Through this initiative, ULI will work to articulate a vision for transportation policy focused on the three values of mobility, livability, and sustainability.

Over the next year and a half, ULI will convene stakeholders in a dialogue about transportation issues, and it will also publish a number of articles in *Urban Land* magazine and elsewhere. These activities are designed to seek feedback from and educate ULI members, to help articulate the impacts that transportation trends will have on the development industry, and to highlight best practices and articulate clear choices. ULI will also engage

with other organizations involved in shaping policy choices, groups as diverse as Smart Growth America and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, to share and discuss what ULI believes to be the best choices and directions for our communities. These policy discussions, which will be widely shared with public and civic leaders, are receiving generous support from the Rockefeller Foundation and ULI trustee James Curtis.

The United States is at a critical point in its history. The decisions taken now will either position the country to work toward an ever-brighter and more sustainable future, or will help ensure that it lurches chaotically from one energy and housing crisis to another every 20 years. Transportation infrastructure determines the pattern of our lives; it has shaped our history, and it will help determine our future. **UL**