

News from Congressman Jim Oberstar



Spring 2002

Emerging Issues in

Transportation Policy and Technology

Dear Friend,

The beginning of the summer road construction season is a good time to explore emerging issues in transportation. This newsletter provides information on issues that will greatly shape our nation's transportation system in the early decades of this new century: (1) transportation and quality of life; (2) intermodalism and modal connections to move people and goods; and (3) the role of technology. In April 2002, I explored these issues with leaders in the transportation industry at the James L. Oberstar Forum on Transportation Policy and Technology, sponsored by the University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies, and want to share these transportation ideas with you.

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Sincerely,

James L. Oberstar, M.C.

Congressman Oberstar has an office near you! If you have questions about these or any other issues, call us or visit our website at www.house.gov/oberstar



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Transportation and Quality of Life

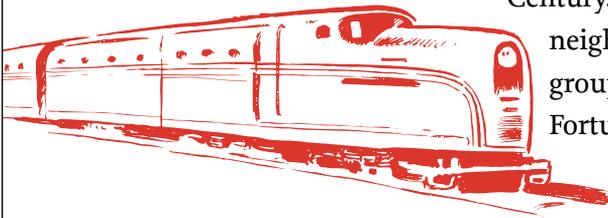
New Vision of Transportation

For most of the 20th Century, the primary focus of surface transportation policy was constructing a safe, efficient highway system, the Interstate and Defense Highway System, to connect the nation's cities, farms, and defense bases. **The American people invested more than \$114 billion in constructing the 42,800-mile Interstate system, an investment which has paid phenomenal returns in mobility, productivity, and economic growth.** It is an unparalleled success: the interstate system is one percent of America's highway miles, but carries 24 percent of the traffic. Today, the vision of that system is a reality as the final few miles of the Interstate reach completion.

Over the last decade, a new vision of transportation has emerged—shifting from a focus on moving vehicles to providing transportation choices. The early framework of this vision was embodied in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) in 1991. The “highway bill” became more than that as Congress focused new efforts (and funding) on transit, congestion mitigation, intelligent transportation systems, and transportation alternatives, such as pedestrian and bike paths. In 1998, the successor to ISTEA, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) brought further clarity to the vision of federal transportation investment by providing a framework to develop transportation choices and creating more livable communities.

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Today, the U.S. is in the midst of a changing vision of transportation for the 21st Century. In communities all across America, neighbors, local businesses, community groups, parent-teacher associations, and Fortune 500 companies are quickly coming to a consensus that creating transportation choices and livable communities are critically important quality of life issues. The paradigm shift must move beyond where highways now lead, to where it is people want to go and how to give them choices to get there.



Congestion and Transportation Choices

Today, solving highway gridlock is one of the biggest challenges in the transportation industry. According to the Texas Transportation Institute, time and money lost

to households and businesses from congestion and delay on the nation's highway system could be as high as \$100 billion a year. These costs are projected to grow in the future, increasing transportation costs and reducing business profitability. More importantly, families are losing what precious little time they have together because they are stuck in traffic on their way home from work, picking the kids up at day care, or running the endless errands that seem a part of today's society.

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As a result, people are actively seeking alternatives to highways. In the last six years, transit ridership has outpaced the growth of every other mode of transportation. **Light rail is one of the most important success stories of TEA-21, growing to more than 310 million trips in 2001, a 25 percent increase over the last five years.** In addition, new light rail projects are far exceeding their initial projections on ridership.

Transportation and Health

There is a new emphasis on the health impacts of transportation choices the public makes. America's children are developing a more sedentary lifestyle at an earlier age, which is having dramatic effects on their health and well-being.



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To address this shift in lifestyle, Congressman Oberstar has initiated Safe Routes to School programs in several states. **Safe Routes to School has grown into a national movement to provide children with the opportunity to walk or bike to school in a safe, secure environment.** The program includes developing "walking school buses," expanding sidewalks and bike paths, calming traffic patterns near schools, and teaching children the importance of pedestrian and bike safety. The program offers several benefits, including providing children with fresh air and exercise, while reducing traffic, fuel consumption, and air pollution.

Intermodalism and Modal Connections to Move People and Goods

Congressman Oberstar and Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta discussed transportation issues at the James L. Oberstar Forum on Transportation Policy and Technology.



A second emerging issue in transportation is intermodalism and improved modal connections to move people and goods.

Moving Goods

In 1980, 16 percent of the nation's gross domestic product was dedicated to logistics (transportation and inventory costs). In the subsequent two decades, that percentage has been reduced to ten percent through improved efficiencies in transportation systems and productivity gains in inventory practices, resulting in a savings of \$600 billion per year. Much of these savings is attributable to intermodalism—connecting ports, railroads, and trucks into an integrated, seamless system. Creating better intermodal connections can boost competitiveness by reducing congestion, cutting travel times, and further lowering transportation costs.

Moving People

Moving people requires developing better ways to connect people in a seamless passenger system of transportation choices. The United States must do a better job of giving people transportation choices, and progress is being made in this direction. For the last three years, Congressman Oberstar has worked to pass a bill to provide funding to construct high-speed rail, like the Midwest Regional Rail Initiative. High-speed rail service throughout the Midwest could provide travelers a faster, more efficient system than either highway travel or short-haul flights.

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Mark Yudof, President of the University of Minnesota, presents an award to Congressman Oberstar commemorating the inaugural James L. Oberstar Forum on Transportation Policy and Technology on April 29, 2002. The University named the forum in Congressman Oberstar's honor because of his many years of service as a transportation leader in the U.S. House of Representatives.



Competing Modal Interests

Nevertheless, in the United States, intermodalism is easier said than done because of often competing interests among the different modes of transportation. Trucking competes with railroads. Airlines worry about their bottom line, not airport ground access. **When completed, the Twin Cities Hiawatha Light Rail line will be a premier example of progress in the intermodal arena.** At Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, travelers will find the connection directly in the terminal, which is particularly important if people are carrying luggage. Although progress has been made in intermodalism, the nation can do a better job of integrating its transportation systems.

The Role of Technology

Highway and Transit Efficiency Benefits

Technology can also help in overcoming system constraints. Intelligent transportation systems (ITS) can help in addressing the emerging issues

by reducing congestion, improving quality of life, and integrating systems.

Technology advances, providing increased system efficiency, safety improvements, and time and cost savings, are playing a critical role in moving people and goods. For example, freeway management systems, primarily through ramp metering, have reduced crashes by 24 to 50 percent. In Minnesota, ramp metering in the Minneapolis area has been a cost effective investment of public funds by increasing speeds by 30 percent and freeway capacity by 22 percent and reducing accident rates by 31 percent. The ramp metering has resulted in annual savings of more than \$40 million to the Twin Cities traveling public.

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Technology Concerns

Despite these great benefits of technology advances, there are also economic and privacy concerns that can cause resistance to its implementation. Improvements in the nation's transportation system will require management to work with labor to develop a partnership to implement new technologies. Management needs to address their employees' concerns regarding job protection by providing adequate retraining and management, and labor must work together to expedite the flow of goods.

Human Limitations and Technology

While technology is providing some great advances in safety and efficiency, it is important to remember that there are limits to what technology can do. Technology cannot take the place of human performance or overcome human limitations, such as the need for sleep.



For example, technological improvements have enabled pilots to fly planes non-stop for greater distances than ever before, and have led to greater automation in the cockpit on the theory that greater reliance on computers

can help decrease “human error.” However, these ever increasing distances and reliance on technological advances do not necessarily consider the limits of the human body, and the result can be pilot fatigue. **A high priority should be placed on ensuring that technological advances do not lead to more human error.**

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