

Oberstar Democracy Project



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Oberstar Op-Ed, The Future of Transportation

One hundred years ago, a traveler visiting the Twin Ports could take a train to Duluth. At the train station, he could hop on a trolley and head down to the waterfront where he could catch a ship to Chicago or any of the other Great Lakes ports. At that time, Duluth was a hub for all means of transportation from sailing ships, to passenger trains, to the new hi-tech automobile. As we consider what it will take to meet the transportation needs of America in the 21st Century, we could learn a lesson by looking back to the beginning of the last century.

As cars and trucks became more powerful, the older, slower and less convenient modes of transportation were replaced with our Interstate Highway System. But since the completion of the Interstate in the mid 1990s, we have not significantly expanded the capacity of our nation's transportation system. In 1960, there were 74 million cars and 2 million trucks on the nation's highways; today there are over 235 million cars and trucks. Congestion in urban areas is slowing our economy, making goods and services more expensive. The cost of this congestion to our economy is \$78 billion a year in wasted time and fuel; in effect this is a congestion tax that we are all paying in the form of more expensive goods and services.

The demands of our economy are so great that no single means of transportation can handle it alone. It's time to restructure the way America moves people and products in

our marketplace. First, we need to make our current infrastructure work better. Continued investment in, and expansion of, our Interstate Highway System will move more vehicles with new methods and technologies. Intelligent transportation management, redesign of outdated and functionally obsolete interchanges, and extra lanes for increased traffic can do a great deal to ease congestion. Unfortunately, this will not be enough.

Expanding public transit by adding more buses, light rail, and commuter rail can take millions of cars off the road each year. In the Twin Cities alone, public transportation eliminates 5.3 million hours of traffic congestion each year and saves the state's economy \$96 million.

Congestion in urban areas eventually impacts all of Minnesota. If goods from our farms, forests, mines and mills take longer to move, costs go up, and jobs are lost. Buses and commuter rail can reduce our dependence of foreign oil. If, nationwide, we could shift just ten percent of the trips we take by car each day to some form of public transportation, we would save the equivalent of all the oil we import from Saudi Arabia in a single year: 550 million barrels a year.

We need more options for moving freight on our roads, rails and even by water. Right now it takes a cargo container arriving in Los Angeles 40 hours to move 1,800 miles by train to Chicago. It then takes another 36 hours to move that same container the next 7 miles

through the Chicago rail yards. We must address chokepoints like this across our freight rail-system that have not been significantly upgraded in decades.

An exciting new development for the movement of goods is short sea shipping. This year, the House of Representatives passed my legislation to fund low interest loans to help shipping companies build an entire new class of cargo ships. These new, hi-tech, energy efficient vessels will be able to transport cargo that once went by rail on the nation's three saltwater coasts and the fourth coast, the Great Lakes.

The key is to have all of these new types of transportation fit together seamlessly in an integrated system that allows goods and services to flow to the cheapest, most efficient mode of transportation. Cargo containers may begin on a train, then transfer to truck for final delivery in an urban area. Or they may be loaded to a new cargo vessel in Duluth that will take them to New York.

Intermodalism will be the new policy for the future, providing businesses and individuals with more transportation options. In the future, as in the past, Duluth residents may board the train for other destinations. Pulling out of the station, they will pass a busy sea port where goods are being loaded on ships bound for destinations all over the world. The train will roll past a great freeway carrying goods and people all the way to Texas. They will be using a transportation system that reflects the greatness of America's innovative spirit.

Jim Oberstar: Blaming and Taxing? Lets Check Reality

Jason Lewis rants about my response to the bridge tragedy. Fact is, I offer reasonable solutions to real problems.

Conservative radio talk show host Jason Lewis is in the business of hyperbole. He is making a good living putting anecdote over analysis and making outrageous statements that get the blood of his listeners boiling. That was pretty evident when he took on the issue of repairing our nation's bridges in his Oct. 22 opinion piece "Pointing fingers and clawing at our wallets." Lewis contends that I am ruthlessly using the tragedy of the Interstate 35W bridge collapse to raise the gas tax. He also accuses me of being ~ try not to be too shocked ~ a supporter of public transportation. Finally, Lewis implies the nation's transportation system is being neglected by members of Congress responding to the needs of their own districts, directing funding to projects that are important to the communities they represent. Unfortunately, Lewis' ability to rant is not matched by his skill at math. Let's look at the real numbers making an impact on our nation's transportation system: The biggest number is \$84 billion. That is the difference between the \$370 billion that the Bush administration's own Transportation Department said would be needed over a six-year period to keep pace with congestion and the \$286 billion that was finally passed after a year of negotiations with the White House.

Claims that members of Congress are spending too much transportation money responding to the needs of their own districts are also unrelated to the actual numbers. In the last federal highway bill, \$24 billion, or 8 percent, of the total funding went to fund members' high priority projects. Lewis and others also claim that bicycle and walking paths are leeching funds away from the maintenance of our roads and bridges. But concentrating on math instead of political rhetoric reveals that only 4 percent of all members' high-priority projects went to bicycle and footpaths nationwide in the last federal highway bill. That's 4 percent of 8 percent, or .0032 of the total amount of the bill. It is barely enough to replace two structurally deficient bridges like the I-35W bridge. After that there would be 73,782 bridges left to deal with.

It is unfathomable to me that Lewis and others could look at the tragedy of the bridge collapse and not be moved to act decisively. According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, it will take \$188 billion to fix all of the nation's structurally deficient and functionally obsolete bridges. My national bridge initiative makes a good start on resolving this problem. It would raise \$25 billion over three years. Drivers would pay an additional 5 cents a gallon (not the 23.5 cents that Lewis suggests) at the gas pump, to go into a special bridge trust fund. This money could only be spent on

inspecting and repairing bridges, and it would be distributed based on public-safety needs; it could not be redirected, or "earmarked," by the White House, Congress or any of the states' governors or bureaucrats. The increase in the user fee would sunset in three years. However, the problem is bigger than bridges and even bigger than the Interstate Highway System. The number of cars on our highways has increased exponentially since the Interstate System was designed and built. In 1960, there were 74 million cars and 2 million trucks on the nation's highways; today there are more than 235 million cars and trucks.

Our economy is simply too big to rely so heavily on freeways to move all the people and products in our marketplace. You wouldn't invest your entire retirement portfolio in a single stock, no matter how good the company is. So why should we risk the future of America's economy by investing in a single mode of transportation to move all of our goods, services and people? Public transportation, buses, light rail, commuter rail, and even walking and bike paths are all parts of the solution. In the Twin Cities, congestion causes 5.3 million hours of delay a year. However, public transit eliminates 5.2 million hours of congestion. Without public transportation in the Twin Cities, congestion would be twice as bad. Unless we give commuters more options and better choices, this problem

will only continue to get worse. Congestion costs money: \$1.2 billion a year to Minnesota's economy in wasted time and fuel; nationwide, that figure grows to \$78 billion. This is a congestion tax that we are all paying in the form of more expensive goods and services.

Nationally, we have not significantly expanded our transportation infrastructure since we completed the Interstate System. Americans are willing to make the investment if you are straight with them about what it will cost and assure them they are getting a fair return on that investment. When it comes to the debate on our transportation needs and practical solutions, Lewis adds nothing but misinformation and confusion, neither of which is in short supply.



“The number of cars on our highways has increased exponentially since the Interstate System was designed and built. In 1960, there were 74 million cars and 2 million trucks on the nation's highways; today there are more than 235 million cars and trucks.” - Jim Oberstar



“Because of the success of the Clean Water Act, the rate of wetland loss in the United States has slowed. Wetlands aren’t important only to breeding and wintering habitat for ducks and geese; they recharge ground water, offer recreational opportunities, provide flood protection, and help filter pollution,” said Ducks Unlimited’s Executive Vice-President Don Young.



Clean Water Act Threatened

35th Anniversary sees reversal in federal wetland protection

<http://www.ducks.org/news/1404/CleanWaterActthreat.html>

WASHINGTON, DC, October 18, 2007 – Waterfowl and other wildlife have enjoyed habitat protection under the Clean Water Act for more than three decades. October 18th marks the Act’s 35th Anniversary, but celebration will be tempered. Recent Supreme Court rulings have stripped much of the Act’s capacity to protect our nation’s wetlands. Coinciding with the anniversary, both the House of Representatives and the Senate are debating ways to restore the Clean Water Act. “Because of the success of the Clean Water Act, the rate of wetland loss in the United States has slowed. Wetlands aren’t important only to breeding and wintering habitat for ducks and geese; they recharge ground water, offer recreational opportunities, provide flood protection, and help filter pollution,” said Ducks Unlimited’s Executive Vice-President Don Young. “Federal protection of these areas is critical.”

Progress made since the Act was signed in 1972 is now being rolled-back. Two Supreme Court rulings, Solid Waste

Agency of Northern Cook County v. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 2001 and Rapanos v. United States in 2006 have left about 20 million acres of our nation’s geographically isolated wetlands at risk and 60% of our stream miles unprotected. “We are moving toward a goal of achieving no net loss of wetlands, and there have been significant improvements in water quality and habitat throughout the country. Our hundreds of thousands of members believe that we can’t afford to let these rulings reverse this direction,” said Ducks Unlimited’s President, Bruce Lewis.

The Senate and the House of Representatives are both looking for a way to restore lost protections in the Clean Water Act—the result is the Clean Water Restoration Act recently introduced in both chambers. According to the bills’ sponsors, the legislation does not expand the jurisdiction of the federal government, nor does it place any increased regulatory burden on agriculture and forestry. CWRA is designed to simply return the Clean Water Act to the way it had been for more than thirty years before the Supreme Court decisions, and would clear up confusion created by those rulings.

Ducks Unlimited offered testimony regarding the Clean Water Restoration Act before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure in July. “The nation’s remaining wetlands are at significant risk of loss, and the waterfowl, other wildlife, and related interests that depend upon these wetlands are similarly at risk,” said Ducks Unlimited’s National Director of Conservation Operations Dr. Scott Yaich in his testimony. “Passage of legislation is the only apparent remedy for restoring wetland protections that are at least as strong as those that existed prior to 2001.”

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife-related outdoor recreation contributes \$120 billion to the economy each year. Across the country, 34 million hunters and anglers depend on geographically isolated wetlands and waterways. A loss of these habitats will only contribute further to the downward trend in participation in these traditions.

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