

Resolving bottlenecks is a necessary priority of nation's traffic plans (The News Journal)

July 14, 2008

The decay of American highways and bridges will require daunting sums of money to fix and improve them to carry today's traffic volumes. Structural and systemic failures are so extensive and expensive, there must be a smarter way of spending and prioritizing urgent projects across the country.

A congressional estimate put a low number of \$220 billion annually on reconstruction -- and potentially much more. That's compared to \$86 billion in current federal funds for roads, transit and railroads.

Using I-95 as a perfect example of what's wrong, U.S. Rep. Michael Castle of Delaware has written legislation with Rep. Michael Capuano of the Boston area to concentrate on critical regional highway failures.

The National Highway Chokepoint Congestion Relief Act they've introduced dovetails with other infrastructure measures in the Senate and the states. This rethinking of how allocations are made is imperative given today's debt-ridden economic climate and the enormous scale of work to be done.

And because Congress will do another federal transportation bill in 2009, the timing is right. The chokepoint bill would direct the U.S. Transportation Department to work with state planners to designate problem areas on the basis of vehicle-miles traveled, hours of delay and wasted fuel, accidents and impediments like inclines and tollbooths, trucks and proximity to shipping, airports, rail and tourism. Funding would follow.

Major Delaware businesses and civic groups had approached Rep. Castle with a sense that this state would suffer unless I-95 congestion was fixed. Rep. Capuano, a member of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, sees the same problems around his hometown of Boston. Reps. Castle and Capuano, Republican and Democrat respectively, note that bottlenecks plague most major cities, so commuters waste the equivalent of eight work days each stuck in traffic and hundreds of dollars in gas.

Also in Congress, Senators Chris Dodd and Chuck Hagel proposed creating a National Infrastructure Bank of independent experts to evaluate and finance projects worth \$75 million or more. The idea is to stop waste on dubious "bridges to nowhere" and the like, when real necessities are underfunded.

These sensible efforts in the House and Senate should be pulled together.

