



We Must Make Transit a Part of the Coming Infrastructure Debate

In an age of extreme partisanship here in Washington, D.C., a time where compromise has become a forgotten concept, there is one political issue that unites Republicans and Democrats, rural and urban voters — infrastructure.

Take a look:

- In mid-September, [a Harvard-Harris poll](#) of 2,177 registered voters found 84 percent thought the country should invest more in infrastructure with 76 percent agreeing that this infrastructure should be paid for through a combination of bonding, public-private partnerships and government spending.
- A national [Association of Equipment Manufacturers poll](#) in August found striking (80+%) rural and urban voter agreement on the idea that infrastructure investment will strengthen the American economy and increase jobs in their communities.
- Another August poll, this one conducted by [Morning Consult for the American Mining Association](#), found just three percent of Americans were not concerned about the country's infrastructure.

Given those rarified numbers, it can come as little surprise that key Congressional Committees have begun to collect infrastructure projects. Or that several recent visits with Congressional offices by CTAA staff have revealed the emerging timeframe for an infrastructure plan to be, “early in 2018.” Administration officials, led by Secretary of Transportation [Elaine Chao](#), seem to be moving in the same general direction, though without too much specificity, as-of-yet.

Many pundits and politicians have long [pointed to tax reform](#) as the pivotal first step in funding real infrastructure spending, because it (pardon the pun) paves the way

for some real federal investment to be available for infrastructure. Well, as I write this (Thursday, Nov. 2), the Republicans are announcing [their tax reform proposal](#).

Great news.... Right? Well maybe, but not so fast. Because I'm increasingly concerned that transit is not always included in the burgeoning infrastructure discussion.

Transit leaders and advocates from communities of all sizes and from all around the nation must begin to seriously and strenuously make the case that our buses, facilities, technology and bus stops are all key parts of the nation's infrastructure, and that in many cases, they're in dire need of replacement and upgrading. This case needs to be made with local, state and federal elected officials. It needs to be made with key local partners (think: your transit vendors, local Chambers of Commerce, health care partners, employers, etc.). Most of all, it's a case that needs to be made.

Transit could very well be left behind. Across D.C., those leading the infrastructure discussion are quick to reveal that they are thinking far beyond roads, bridges, rails and transit when it comes to an infrastructure program. Listen closely, and one hears schools, power generation plants, hospitals, and more. Clearly, transit is going to have to compete.

Since the inception of the infrastructure discussion, the Trump Administration has often pointed to innovative finance and public-private partnerships (PPPs) as its preferred way to invest \$1 trillion in infrastructure. Justifiably, many CTAA members and other transit systems have looked askance at such financing mechanisms, knowing all too well that they will not support, for example, needed bus replacements in small-urban and rural transit. But that argument, too, likely needs a rethink.

Every CTAA member has private-sector partners. Granted, they might not all be profit-making or even all that innovative. But they are there, and now is the time to collect and articulate this reality. Do you contract with any employers or healthcare providers? Do you use privately owned garages for vehicle maintenance? Most public transit operators, regardless of size, have several meaningful partnerships with the private sector. As you begin to actively discuss transit infrastructure, be sure to emphasize these important partnerships — and do not shy away from them.

The coming infrastructure plan will not be like the stimulus (or, ARRA) program of the late 2000s — this much we know. Shovel-ready won't be the buzzword and I'd expect to see far more active Congressional involvement as opposed to opposition (remember, those polling numbers). CTAA has also heard from people close to Congressional negotiations on the infrastructure issue that public investments — or investments that benefit the public — will likely be underscored.

The time is now to effectively position public and community transit as sound and necessary transportation infrastructure for the growing numbers of:

- older Americans who cannot or do not drive

- people with disabilities
- younger people in urban areas seeking alternatives to private automobiles
- Americans suffering from chronic medical conditions and who need regular rides to doctor's appointments and therapies
- urban residents plagued by clogged commutes and congestion
- rural residents who wish to remain independent in the small towns they call home.

I think (hope) you get my point. If we want all forms of transit to be part of the infrastructure discussion, we have to be intentional to make it happen and not wait around and hope things break in transit's favor.