

# The Times-Tribune

## Fund, hasten crucial infrastructure projects

BY LAURA PERROTTA / PUBLISHED: APRIL 24, 2020

COVID-19 and our local, state and national response is at the top of everyone's mind. Over the last few weeks, we all have witnessed how our roads and bridges are a critical lifeline to ensure that our nation's supplies get to where they need to be, when they need to be there. If we fail to prioritize our highway infrastructure at this vital point in our nation's history, we will fail to provide for the speed of delivery and the access to care that so many Americans need right now.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has underscored the need to move quickly on roadway projects and other infrastructure development measures to ensure our country never has an issue moving goods and products to market.

Lawmakers are considering including highway funding in an economic stimulus package, which only emphasizes the urgent need to strengthen America's infrastructure. There will be a dramatic drop off in revenue for the federal Highway Trust Fund and in state coffers for roadway investments due to the pandemic. Driving less will mean less federal and state gas tax revenue and from other excise and sales taxes. The next recovery package should prioritize infrastructure funding and speed up roadway projects.

On April 9, the American Highway Users Alliance sent a letter to congressional leadership urging Congress to provide emergency funds to state transportation departments and to pass a long-term and robustly funded highway and transportation reauthorization.

Given the rapidly evolving virus situation, in many states expediting roadway projects hasn't been the priority. Roadway projects are trapped in multiyear permitting processes that, on average, take seven years to complete. It took 25 years to begin construction of the Basnight Bridge in North Carolina while it only took three years to build that bridge. This is unacceptable, especially at a time when the majority of Americans are under stay-at-home orders and depend on delivery of goods to survive.

Many Pennsylvanians drive the Interstate 81 corridor regularly. If you take a look at that highway today, you will see truck after truck delivering critical supplies to Pennsylvania and the rest of the country.

Also, as is typical in spring, we would see orange cones marking a new construction zone. Commuters and truck drivers are often forced to drive in one lane for miles and miles through sections that are in desperate need of repair.

Imagine if that work was coordinated or completed with more efficiency and speed. Streamlining the long and costly National Environmental Policy Act review process is important to expedite critical projects such as those on I-81. Roadway project delays increase costs and create uncertainty over

important infrastructure improvements, even those projects that save lives by helping to ensure rapid delivery of critical supplies.

The Council on Environmental Quality released a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking on Jan. 10 that would unlock the needed investment in our infrastructure through utilizing today's modern processes and respectful environmental considerations through updating NEPA.

A long process is not necessary to protect the public's interest in environmental review, but a long process thwarts the completion of beneficial projects that would boost the economy, provide jobs, and improve mobility for people and commerce. America needs additional infrastructure investment and should not let an outdated review process stand in the way of the public interest.

NEPA is a procedural statute. For a highway project, it is hard to imagine a truly concerning environmental feature that could not be identified in two years but would require a process of seven years to be identified.

Setting time limits and page limits for the NEPA permitting process makes sense, especially when there is the ability to exceed those limits when it is determined appropriate. Burying a roadway project in red tape, paper, and duplication is not a good way to spend our limited resources. Especially, when the recently released 23rd edition of USDOT's Conditions and Performance Report on Highways, Bridges and Transit identifies a \$786.4 billion backlog of highway and bridge investments.

Speeding up the process to start roadway projects will allow Americans to have access to safer roads sooner. New or updated roadways likely will include the latest roadway safety features like guardrails, brighter and wider pavement markings and brighter signs. All of these improvements can help drive down the approximately 37,000 fatalities that occur on our roadways each year.

Let's make sure we are investing in American roadways and our future today through prioritizing infrastructure in the next relief package and streamlining NEPA.

Advancing these vitally important policies will allow us to keep services, goods, medicines, supplies and products flowing to our nation during such a critical juncture and will speed our recovery.