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The infrastructure business: Design, build and maintain

sm Stephen Morgan



Featherstonhaugh,
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In the infrastructure business, the title of this article might be thought of as a method of advancing capital projects, but for now I will use it as a call to rise up and meet the needs of New York's rapidly and dangerously deteriorating infrastructure. I could have said "Face it, Fund it and Fix it," but I would have left out an important effort in this equation--design. Even if all our infrastructure investment lobbying efforts in Washington and Albany prove successful, obtaining adequate funding will not be effective if we do not have design plans "on the shelf" and ready to go when funding is realized.

This was the case in 2009 with the \$1.1-billion road and bridge funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act. The projects selected were shovel ready and not necessarily high on NYSDOT's priority list; and no AARA funds were used for future design. Over the last few years, starting with the 2005 Transportation Bond Act, we have seen study upon study from government and academic institutions to industry report cards, all of which indicate that without a significant, long term increase in transportation funding, road and bridge conditions will continue to deteriorate, congestion will worsen, and the condition of New York's public transportation system will decline.

As we have witnessed in other parts of the country, from a new bridge in Missouri to a replacement road at the Jersey shore, construction-ready projects are getting funding. A relatively small investment in design services now, on average equal to about 6 percent of total construction dollars, can help secure funding and create jobs for many, in turn getting the state back on more solid economic footing. For every billion dollars spent on transportation construction – and therefore roughly every \$60 million on transportation design services – 34,000 jobs are created, according to ACEC sources.

In 2008 the New York State Department of Transportation issued a report that found the state needs

to spend \$175 billion from 2010-2030 to maintain roads, highways, bridges and transit systems to provide adequate mobility. But under current funding formulas the state expects that revenues will be less than half that amount, resulting in a nearly \$90 billion shortfall. That was 2008, so where are we now? Certainly the outlook hasn't gotten any brighter. Moreover, that figure of \$175 billion would not necessarily improve conditions, but keep our system where it is today. That's a scary thought for the future health and welfare of our state.

We all feel the pain of the ongoing recession. We see the general unemployment rate at 10%, and at over 20% in the construction industry. We are told by political leaders that there are deficits, budget cuts need to be made, and we need to do more with less. In New York the MTA and NYSDOT's much needed five-year capital plans are considered "unaffordable."

In Washington, Congress let the last five-year transportation authorization legislation, SAFETEA-LU, expire on September 30, 2009, with no new plan being discussed in 2010. New York State's Dedicated Highway and Bridge Trust Fund is near broke and relying on General Fund money being transferred in for DOT to move forward on a reduced two-year capital plan. To their credit the MTA and NYSDOT are continuing to educate, advocate and fight for adequate capital resources. In a recent MTA publication, "Making Every Dollar Count," chairman Jay Walder said, "Whether we are planning and building major additions to the system or fixing the current infrastructure, continuing to invest in the region's transportation network is critical to the MTA's ability to serve the region and drive its economic recovery." Commissioner Stan Gee of NYSDOT said at his legislative budget hearing that he understands the current economic climate, but we do need to increase infrastructure investment for all parts of our transportation system and we cannot stop planning for the future. This comes back to my point on engineering: We need to be ready.

I have just read "Bold Endeavors: How our Government Built America, and Why It Must Rebuild Now," by Felix Rohatyn. I worked in the Carey administration and remember Rohatyn well for his success in saving New York City from

bankruptcy in the mid '70s. His new book is a narrative about ten large transformational public works events in American history, from the Erie Canal to the Interstate Highway System. Rohatyn calls for bold and imaginative political leadership to finance the rebuilding of the nation's infrastructure before it is too late. Hopefully we have learned from the past. He states that if the nation is to be "...rebuilt and its infrastructure renewed then it must be guided by the vision, determination, investments that originally helped create a secure and prosperous America." Our present-day political leaders need to read this book and act.

Transportation is a national issue impacting our economy, and funding the system's vast needs creates a major challenge for all of us. Consulting engineers, the construction industry trade associations, and the men and women who work on infrastructure projects understand the importance of continued investment. Now we have to take that knowledge, enthusiasm and message to key decision makers and elected officials, and convince them to be advocates for designing, building and maintaining our aging infrastructure now. It's vital to the continued economic growth and improved quality of life for the Empire State and its residents.

Stephen Morgan is a lobbyist for ACEC New York, former executive director of the NYS Thruway Authority and secretary of New York Roadway Improvement Coalition.

Calendar of Events

March 27
Engineering Excellence
Dinner Dance
Waldorf=Astoria Hotel,
NYC

June 16
Spring Meeting
Roosevelt Hotel, NYC

September 12-14
Fall Conference
Gideon Putnam Resort,
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

For more information visit
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