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Transit solution takes more than profit
Fred Hiatt - Washington Post

The next time you are stuck in traffic (and when are you not?), you might take a moment to ponder Mary Peters's contribution to the fix you are in.

Peters is the Bush administration's transportation secretary, and her main objective seems to be blocking any increase of public contributions to the public infrastructure. The main reason you are sitting in traffic, she believes, is not that the purchasing power of Highway Trust Fund revenue has been dwindling for the past decade, not that population and freight traffic have been soaring with no government response — but that you are not being asked to pay enough to use the road you are on.

The rigidity of the administration's ideology became clear this month with the culmination of a two-year study of the nation's transportation woes. A bipartisan federal commission came up with a comprehensive, balanced plan for the next 50 years, calling for maintenance and construction, road and rail, public and private funds.

Nine of the commission's 12 members endorsed the report. A majority of the nine were GOP appointees, including commissioners chosen by then-Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist and then-House Speaker Denny Hastert. But three members representing the administration, including Peters, dissented.

Peters acknowledged in her dissent that traffic congestion already is costing the U.S. economy as much as \$200 billion a year. She acknowledged that growth in population and commerce is "straining our transportation system as never before," harming productivity, mobility and the environment.

"We believe, however, that a failure to properly align supply and demand, not a failure to generate sufficient tax revenues, is the essential policy failure," the Bush dissenters wrote. This is an astonishingly radical view of government's role in transportation. Cast backward, it would suggest that President Dwight D. Eisenhower never should have built the interstate highway system; it should have been left to private companies to build roads wherever tolling could generate a profit, and nowhere else. The result — an incomplete, disconnected patchwork of highways — might indeed have suited Peters, given that another of her goals is a reduced federal role in transportation policy. But the country would have been poorer for it.

Peters is right to stress the importance of private-public partnerships. It also makes sense to have users pay their way, and pay more at peak hours, through congestion pricing, London-style fees to drive downtown and similar mechanisms.

In fact, the bipartisan majority endorses all of these. The commission stresses the need to shift from the current pork-barrel, earmark-driven spending to a more rational alignment of money and mission, and it suggests how that might be accomplished. No tax increases will or should be adopted until then, it says.

But the rational majority of the commission also understands that the current underinvestment, if continued, will cost lives (see: the collapsed bridge in Minnesota in August), time and economic growth, and that the government has to play a role along with

the private sector.

"We're living off investments made 40, 50 --- in New York City, 100 --- years ago," said commission member Frank McArdle, an adviser to the New York state contractors association.

You can see the effect of the Bush ideology in recent reports that the administration is yet again looking for excuses to kill rapid transit rail to Dulles airport. Having jumped through every hoop demanded --- giving up on a tunnel through Tysons Corner, cutting \$300 million in costs --- the region finds itself facing another, unexplained roadblock. But if you understand the Bush philosophy, the roadblock isn't so hard to explain: If profit alone --- and not clean air, or joining the rest of the civilized world in connecting airports to cities, or any other consideration --- matters, then Dulles rail no doubt slides down the priority list. The Peters model might work if the only national interest were maximum efficiency. But if the nation cares about the environment, about staying connected, about balancing roads and rail and transit, then it will have to invest, as a nation, and plan, as a nation. The bipartisan nature of the commission report gives hope that the next administration, whoever leads it, will understand that.

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