WEST VIRGINIA: A RURAL POINT OF VIEW

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I am presenting a rural viewpoint. West Virginia, with 1.8 million people, is wholly within Appalachia, a region defined by the U.S. government. The Appalachian Regional Commission was established in 1965 to stimulate economic development. As part of its mission, it constructed the Appalachian Regional Highway System, which to this day is the only highway system ever created by the U.S. government with the sole purpose of stimulating economic development.

Between 1965 and today, the number of counties within West Virginia that are deemed distressed, as measured under federal criteria, has declined significantly. And it is no coincidence that counties located along the state border—that is, those that are accessible to neighboring states—represent the counties that are better off today than was the case in 1965. So there is ample evidence that highway investment has stimulated economic development in this region.

Nonetheless, those of us in rural areas still have a lot of questions specific to our situation, and I would like to present you with some of those questions.

Are the transportation, social, political, economic, and investment criteria for mountainous and rural regions comparable to the criteria for urban regions? Should they be? The roads here are definitely more expensive to build than they are in Kansas, and this holds true in all the mountainous regions of our country.

To what extent should population issues drive our transportation investments? We might take a look at where the people in West Virginia live. Fully half of the people in our state live in the border counties, surrounded by a sea of economic prosperity in Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Ohio.

Might urban sprawl be addressed through the repopulation of small-town America? Thanks to communications technology, it is now a lot easier for people to work in smaller places today than it ever has been.

What does the rise of e-commerce imply for transportation requirements? In my own view, I suspect that e-commerce will reduce transportation requirements to the same extent that it has reduced the amount of paper that we must deal with each day: that is, not much at all. Indeed, the impact of e-commerce on transportation will likely be dramatic because transportation will have to take up the role of distributor, warehouse, and retailer.

And finally, coming from an inland state, I wonder whether expanded investment in inland waterways can become a source of new capacity for the highway and rail system. I also wonder what kind of information is needed to arrive at a response to that question.

In closing, I cannot resist giving you a West Virginian’s definition of “pork.” It is simply money spent by somebody else, somewhere else.