

U.S. Congressional Staff Perspectives on the Research Framework

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I am Counsel to the Subcommittee on Surface Transportation of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. The Subcommittee on Surface Transportation has jurisdiction over the nation's highways, transit, safety, research, and motor carrier and pipeline provisions as they relate to safety. It is the largest subcommittee in the House. It has 33 members and if it were a committee it would be the sixth largest committee in Congress.

The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, as many of you may know, has jurisdiction over all of the nation's transportation programs and is chaired by Bud Shuster of Pennsylvania. This committee is responsible for authorizing the nation's highway, transit, and research programs. As many of you do know, the National Transportation and Research Program was authorized as part of the overall transportation law back in 1991 in the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA). That law expires on June 20, 1997, and the committee's primary work in the second session of the 104th Congress and in the next session will be reauthorizing all of these programs. It is a daunting task that the committee is just now beginning to undertake.

ISTEA really gave a substantial federal commitment to research. It authorized that research funds would be paid out of the Highway Trust Fund from a number of sources. The general operating expenses of the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) is one source from which we authorize that up to 3.75 percent of the overall program could be deducted for operations of DOT as well as for research ends. This has generally meant that between \$100 million and \$300 million annually has gone from DOT's general operating expenses to fund basic research or Intelligent Vehicle-Highway System (IVHS) research.

In conjunction with IVHS research, Congress set out some specific research programs, such as strategic R&D and the Strategic Highway Research Program (SHRP), which it funded at approximately \$120 million per year. Together this made a fairly substantial investment in the research program. In fact over the first 5 years of ISTEA, nearly \$1 billion from the Highway Trust Fund has gone into the various DOT research programs.

This shows that in the last bill, basic research was seen as a real national priority, something that was important for the national program to be doing and something from which there was a real benefit to all citizens. This is the framework within which the research

program has been viewed in the past; and the research program has gotten much larger over the years. The size of the DOT research program has grown substantially and is now, roughly, twice as large as it was 5 years ago. There is some debate as to how exactly to measure it; in fact, DOT might debate exactly how to measure it.

As we head into the next reauthorization, as we sit down and take a look at what has gone on in the research program over the past 5 years, the real question, from the point of view of the members of Congress, is What have been the benefits from it? This is the question we must ask as we attempt to identify what is the national interest in maintaining an active and well-funded research program.

If in the process of reauthorization Mr. Shuster were asked, Who do you think is going to be the most important player in the next reauthorization? His answer would be the Budget Committee because in a large sense the drive toward a balanced budget by 2002 is going to be a major factor in most programmatic decisions. If we truly are going to have a balanced budget by 2002, pressure will be put on almost all discretionary spending, of which the highways is one component. Mr. Shuster's response to the squeeze put on transportation spending would be to take the Transportation Trust Funds off budget, which would eliminate the incentive to reduce spending out of the Highway Trust Fund to finance other programs. So we are assuming for the moment that that is going to happen. But if it does not happen, and there is going to be substantial pressure placed on all parts of the transportation funding, as we look forward to 1997, it is through that prism that the research program is going to be looked at.

As with all programs, I think Congress will in its hearing process undertake a fairly rigorous examination of basic oversight of each and every program and to try to figure out what in each and every program is in the national interest. For those of you who have an interest in and are concerned about the research program this is a real opportunity for you to think about and begin to make the case for why the federal government should be coordinating basic research, what the basic benefits to the country can be, and why it makes sense to continue. I think the case for research is fairly compelling, but it is something that anyone who has an interest in any sector of the program is going to have to make because in a declining budget when there is more and stiffer competition for resources, survival is much more difficult for all programs; that is just a fact of life.

The connection between the research program, DOT, and DOD: I think this is an area that over the past few years has not really been brought out as clearly as it could have been. As many of you may know, one of the primary impetuses behind the major transportation program in the last half century—the Interstate system—was the need for a national system of roads to link military installations and allow for mobilization in case of war. That was the compelling reason behind the formulation and funding of the Interstate program and, in fact, the reason why the Interstate system is called the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways. One of the rationales for the Interstate system came in 1920 when General Eisenhower tried to lead a convoy across country to demonstrate the difficulty in linking the country and the lack of adequate infrastructure.

Ever since then, the importance to national defense of maintaining an adequate level of transportation infrastructure in the country has been predominant and remains a compelling reason why the federal government should be involved in this area. With the completion of the Interstate system, the focus began to shift a little bit from the defense needs and the demands defense would place on the system and focus more on things like congestion and economic growth and other factors, which are admittedly very important but could arguably be more local in nature, involve local competition, and did not have the sort of compelling overall national interest that the defense mobilization had.

In the last session of this Congress, the National Highway Designation Act of 1995 was enacted. The National Highway System, as opposed to the Interstate system, was intended to focus the federal resources on the National Highway System—a 161,000-mile system of Interstate highways, major principal materials, and evacuation routes—and a major component of this was the strategic highway network, which is about 15,000 miles. This act

began to again recognize the defense sector's important interest in maintaining adequate infrastructure and being able to mobilize men and materiel.

The committee heard testimony from the U.S. Military Traffic Management Command about the demands that would be placed on the military in a time of mobilization and the need to move men both on the highways and from defense installations to railheads and airports. The fact is, having an adequate, efficient, and safe highway system has even more importance now at a time when the United States is positioning fewer men overseas and is keeping more of its materiel and troops that would be moved out in time of crisis located in the United States.

As we head into the reauthorization process, those that have an interest in the defense area would be well suited to make the case for the importance of and the critical link between investing in highway infrastructure and meeting our defense needs.

As I said, I think the biggest factors, as Congress looks at all of the various programs, are going to be the overall size of the program and how much funding can be allocated, or how much the Budget Committee permits us to allocate, to transportation. And since a number of groups are concerned about various programs or parts of the programs that they are interested in, I urge everyone to step back and look at the most important factor in all this —What is the overall size of the program and how big is it going to be? And an important component of that is, What is the national interest in transportation and how much of our scarce federal dollars should be allocated to the transportation sector?

As many of you may know, even though the transportation programs are funded through a trust fund as part of the unified budget, the amount spent on transportation counts against the other programs. So despite many claims that it may or may not be in competition with other programs, as long as transportation is part of the unified budget, it ultimately will be in competition with the other programs for allocations out of the federal budget.

I urge all of you, as you meet like this, to keep your eyes on the forest as opposed to the trees, and to look at and make the case for the overall size of the program, make the national case for transportation, make the national case for research, make the national case for funding defense programs, and the national defense interest in transportation infrastructure.