

Congressional Perspective

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I want to thank you for the opportunity to meet with you. When the invitation was first extended I gave a good deal of thought to what I might say about HOV lanes. When I thought about what Congress has done about HOV lanes, the trepidation really began to grow. Just in the Washington, D.C. area alone, the federal government has mandated operation hours and vehicle occupancy requirements. I thought this might not bode to well, as these are decisions we always say should be made at the local level.

This may indicate we need to change our approach as we move forward with reauthorization of the highway and transit bills. I think that this is a positive reaction. When members of Congress react to these types of things it is often a local response.

When Congressmen have to get to and from work they don't look at these issues as national issues, rather they look at them as local concerns that affect them on a daily basis. Maybe this indicates a common theme that there is strong interest in making these decisions at the local level. Unfortunately, being here in the beltway area, you have Congress, along with the local government representatives, to help you make these decisions. So, we will continue to be a partner.

I would like to give you a brief overview of some of the recent activities in the House Public Works Committee. As we establish the agenda for the upcoming legislation, the Public Works Committee will primarily focus on hearings. The new Sub-committee Chairman's approach is to have an open agenda. I think it is important that the Committee is willing to listen to different points of view. This is the first time in many years that the chairman has not started with some preconceived ideas on the final program. In following this approach, we have already had several days of hearings here in Washington, D.C.

Five hearings have been held so far. The Secretary of Transportation presented the new National Transportation Policy at the first hearing. Hearings have continued throughout the month of March. Once we conclude the hearings in Washington, D.C., probably in April, a series of field hearings will be held throughout the country. The sites of these hearings have not yet been decided, other than we will both probably start in California, the home state of both the Sub-committee and Committee Chairmen.

I think this whole session will focus primarily on the hearings. Then during the winter, the staff will begin to identify the

common themes that emerge from the hearings. The initial draft proposals will be developed at this time. The proposals from FHWA and UMTA will be submitted. A draft bill will be circulated for comment and the official hearing process will begin.

As this outline indicates we certainly have a lot of work ahead of us. For the next 19 months the focus will be on the development of the highway and transit program in the post-interstate period. We would welcome any assistance from you. When the Interstate program was first established there was a lot of input from everyone. Over the last 35 years this has been the major focus of the program. Now we are in a new era.

A number of groups have been very active in the identification of issues to be considered in the new program. These include AASHTO, APTA, and other groups. In the highway program there seems to be a common theme emerging that there should be two broad categories; highways of national significance and a flexible program. While there may be general agreement on some of these broad topics, working out the specific details of each program will take a good deal of work. The process will provide the opportunity to discuss and resolve these issues and develop a program that most of us can feel comfortable with.

I think providing flexibility to local areas in the use of funding for highway or transit programs that best meet their needs is important. In the past, mass transportation and highways have been viewed as two separate issues. I think the 1978 Surface Transportation Act represented the first attempt to try to coordinate the timing of the highway and transit reauthorization programs. We now have the opportunity to mesh the two programs even further, and

make them work together. We also have the opportunity to increase the decision making authority of local governments.

One of the tough questions to be faced during the reauthorization is who will pay for the different programs. Determining the mix and match of general funds and highway trust fund dollars will be a challenge. Determining what, if any, formula base should be used to allocate the funds will also be important. Consideration will need to be given to who will make the final decision if there is disagreement at the local level. The two major themes we are hearing are increased funding and flexibility. There is a good deal of support for raising funding levels, but to-date there has been no success at trying to draw down the highway trust fund. We have not heard strong support for increasing the gasoline tax, unless there is a serious and dedicated effort to spend down the trust fund level. So one message appears to be that we need to spend the money we have, and if we can show a continued effort, then maybe increasing taxes can be considered. I don't think you will see any support for gasoline tax increases unless there is a serious effort to spend down the trust fund balance.

The other common theme we have heard is flexibility. Many members of Congress get a little nervous when this term is used. The reason for this nervousness is related to the issue of accountability. I think we will need to show congress that flexibility does work and there are numerous benefits from a more flexible approach.

HOV facilities have been considered a local issue, that, for the most part, Congress has not been involved with. The federal perspective has been that the types of facilities needed to meet the demands should be determined at the local level. The

UMTA Alternatives Analysis includes considerations of these types of facilities. It may be that the FHWA process should also include an examination of such options. The clean air legislation is driving a reexamination of how we address our growing congestion problems. HOV facilities clearly have a role to play in this area. Clearly, just building more highways is not the answer. We need to look at how to move more people more efficiently.

Planning and coordination are clearly part of the answer to many of our problems. We must first show what the problems and needs are and then identify the most cost-effective solutions. It must be a continued and cooperative effort at the local level to show that the local governments have the resources, are accountable, and can make work the programs work.