

National vision and big thinking necessary for America's twenty-first-century transportation infrastructure

John S. Halikowski

Director

Arizona Department of Transportation

Phoenix, Arizona



The APWA Arizona Chapter will host the 2015 APWA International Public Works Congress & Exposition in Phoenix later this summer. You are encouraged to attend and connect with public works professionals from all over the country. Several tours will showcase a variety of projects in the Phoenix metropolitan area, including solar, transit and an urban lake. Hopefully you will also have the opportunity to stay a while following the exposition to travel Arizona's roadways and explore our beautiful state.

In January, Arizona inaugurated a new governor. In his first State of the State address, Governor Doug Ducey called for Arizona to “Think Big” and focus on improving the state’s economy to create opportunity for all. At the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT), we accepted the governor’s challenge as a guiding concept incorporated into ADOT’s vision and strategic plan. Competing to achieve success in a global economy requires a vision and plan of action. Effective leadership aligns and motivates people to action since a vision without implementation is just another idea. For Arizona to compete successfully, it must have an aligned statewide vision and plan coupled with leaders at every level in the public and private spectrums advocating and acting to achieve investment in infrastructure. The alternative—do nothing—throws the state back to a patchwork of competing visions and uncoordinated infrastructure investment, and diminishes our ability to compete with the rest of the world.

Why focus on vision, alignment and action? Arizona, like the United States as a whole, is in a global competition to attract manufacturing to our state to provide high-paying

jobs and a robust economy for the realization of the governor’s vision of “opportunity for all.” ADOT believes that transportation infrastructure is a foundational element of establishing and retaining base manufacturing that improves the economy with a “make it here and sell it there” philosophy. Yet like other states across the nation, Arizona’s capital improvement program to expand and modernize its transportation system is hampered not only by an outmoded and underperforming 1950s revenue model that currently provides the bulk of Arizona’s transportation revenue, but also by complacency and the hope that somehow it will all work out.

Let’s be clear: *Hope is not a strategy and complacency is not competition. We can do better. We need action.*

In fact, as a nation we talk more about how to fund transportation (or to kick the funding can down the road) than about how we will actually use those resources. Why? Because we have no shared national vision and alignment for transportation infrastructure investment, and we are complacent enough to believe that someone else will solve the problem.

Consequently, even though many transportation leaders at all levels have attempted to act and advocate for what they believe is the right solution, the lack of a national vision has fostered a lack of alignment in Congress and consequently resulted in transportation entropy (oxymoron recognized). While many in Congress recognize that “something must be done!” Congress continues to argue with itself about the flaws in funding ideas rather than setting a national vision for a competitive twenty-first-century transportation system and coming to agreement on adequate and sustainable funding mechanisms.

Other countries continue to outpace the United States in percentage of GDP invested in transportation and overall regulatory streamlining. As states and as a nation, complacency and inaction will cost us economic power and jobs in the future.

Infrastructure Planning Built a Nation

It was not always so when it came to recognizing the importance of infrastructure investment. During America’s formative years, our leaders recognized a series of cohesive, shared national visions implemented by

detailed plans that improved our transportation system and built the U.S. into a world leader.

In 1808, President Thomas Jefferson championed the *Report on Roads and Canals*. This national blueprint for the construction of roads and canals was designed to support independent small farmers by linking those farms to markets and East Coast ports.

By the mid-1800s, a national vision for a coast-to-coast railroad network created the Transcontinental Railroad that opened the West to homesteading and development.

In the early 1900s, President Theodore Roosevelt established an Inland Waterways Commission to develop a national plan to improve America's waterways for commercial traffic. Visionary leaders, realizing the nation needed infrastructure to grow and compete in the world economy, championed Roosevelt Dam, Hoover Dam, and numerous reclamation and water management public works projects.

By the mid-twentieth century, the needs of national defense and the goal "to get the farmers out of the mud" fostered a national vision to create the Interstate Highway System, further reshaping the American economy, and proving without a doubt that infrastructure investment is key to competition and economic success.

Transportation Infrastructure: Competition and Complacency

Today, 230 years of vision and leadership alignment has developed transportation infrastructure that has made the United States an economic superpower and improved our lives through a reliable and accessible

transportation system moving us daily from home, to work or school, or literally anywhere on the planet.

What Americans may not understand is that their top priorities—the economy and opportunities for jobs—are directly related to the quality of the

nation's transportation infrastructure. Roads, interstate freeways, ports of entry, airports, rail lines and seaports are conduits driving the economy and creating job opportunities through base manufacturing by making it here and selling it there.

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Need for a National Transportation Vision

As Congress prepares to enact another in a long line of continuing resolutions to kick the transportation funding can down the road, what are those who believe in and are passionate about infrastructure investment as a key to economic success to do? It is apparent that every transportation-related association, professional society and interest group has spent many hours and dollars attempting to convince the legislative and executive branches of the importance of infrastructure investment. At the state level, these efforts have resulted in some states resolving the issue by enacting new or revised investment strategies while others continue to struggle. On the national level, we can continue to hope for something better, but as previously pointed out, hope is not a strategy.

Perhaps as passionate true believers in infrastructure investment, we need to shift our focus and concentrate on two key strategies:

1. **Alignment.** As individual organizations, associations and professional societies, we all have access to policymakers at all levels of government. However, we often approach these policymakers not as a unified front, but as individual organizations touting our particular perspective on the issue. There is strength in numbers. Consequently, a new strategy is to come together and provide policymakers with a national vision and support those willing to step forward and fund infrastructure investment.
2. **Change the audience.** We have been very focused on policymakers and at least awareness has been raised in our executive and legislative branches. However, the

current approach is not resonating with the public on a national level. This is curious since jobs and the economy rank near the top of the general public's list of concerns but the connection between robust infrastructure investment, jobs and the economy has not been made to the extent that citizens are demanding that policymakers fund infrastructure investment.

Consequently, since we have not unified our message and convinced the public, our policymakers are allowed to get away with kicking the infrastructure funding can down the road.

We must all be on a C-L-E-A-R path:

- **Communicate:** Our biggest challenge is to articulate to the public and to decision makers that transportation infrastructure is the key to priming our nation's economic engine. This makes communication between public- and private-sector partners critically important.
- **Lead:** Leadership resulting in decisions and actions on national transportation issues is imperative. Barring that, coordinated decision making at state and local levels of government, and between the public and private sectors, remains essential to push for a national transportation vision.
- **Economics:** It is imperative to reorient transportation investments to meet a globalized twenty-first-century economy. A national transportation vision, plan and incentives must focus on transportation projects that will keep America economically competitive.

- **Alignment:** We all need to be on the same page, looking beyond borders and regions. As individual entities, we have differing goals and priorities. Together in alignment, we are united for a common cause and can pool resources, research data and brainpower.

- **Roots:** The Transcontinental Railroad. The Interstate Highway System. These are transportation systems created years ago with lasting roots in our society. What roots will our generation plant in this era of renewed emphasis on transportation and the economy?

We cannot afford to rest on our past achievements. It is our turn to lead and act to overcome today's barriers to infrastructure investment, and challenges with transportation funding and system improvements. Today, more than ever before, we need to protect the value of existing infrastructure, fix the systems in disrepair, and modernize where needed to ensure transportation meets the economic needs of a twenty-first-century society. U.S. infrastructure and economic strength should be second to none.

John S. Halikowski has been the director of the Arizona Department of Transportation since 2009. He has more than 20 years of experience in transportation legislation and program administration, including 12 years as majority staff research director and transportation committee research analyst for the Arizona House of Representatives and seven years in various management capacities for ADOT's Motor Vehicle Division. He is the immediate past president of the Western Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, and serves on a number of national transportation-related boards and commissions. He can be reached at (602) 712-7227 or director@azdot.gov.