

VIEWPOINTS | 2011

HNTB expert:

Paul Yarossi

President

HNTB Holdings Ltd

Rebuilding America's infrastructure: let's be clear

The state of our U.S. infrastructure is dire. The results of failing to invest in our outdated transportation network and maintain a state of good repair are threatening our resilience, our security, our economic performance and our ability to compete globally.

According to the American Society of Civil Engineers, America needs to make a \$2 trillion infrastructure investment during the next five years. Funding is too dependent on state budgets, however, and the situation will only worsen as federal stimulus spending ends.

Yet, to make real progress, these facts must give way to the real underlying issue as I see it – convincing the American people and Congress *why* they should invest. What are we asking the public to pay for? We don't have a comprehensive national transportation plan that includes an integrated strategy for all modes of transportation, so it is unclear to them where their hard earned dollars are going.

Infrastructure professionals, hand-in-hand with one another, with the public, with private funders and with the legislators who represent us, should act now to create and execute a master infrastructure plan for our country. Let's create a blueprint for where we want to go and what we should build. The opportunity before us is the biggest we've seen since President Dwight Eisenhower championed the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s.

If we embrace this opportunity, we can begin to create the balanced multimodal transportation network this country needs. We can create jobs to turn the economy around. We can ensure infrastructure strength and capacity to support growth in international trade. We can shore up security and safety for our citizens, and we can significantly affect the quality of life in our largest

metropolitan areas. If we do this right, we can literally shape the future of our country.

If we don't, we will continue to lag behind competitors such as China and India. We'll lose more credibility with the American public. And we will face ever-increasing municipal and individual debt, as we attempt to fund infrastructure replacements with incremental funding strategies.

The answer lies in a coordinated, strategic national infrastructure program that crosses all transportation modalities, explained in a way the American people can understand and support – what's in it for them? We must address the interests of a variety of constituents while working together.

The plan also has to leverage both public funding and private investment – a source that we've failed to fully mine. I believe the transportation industry can play a critical role in developing and advocating for innovative ideas around funding, financing tools and strategies.

I see three key hurdles to consider if we are to make real progress:

- We need to do a better job of informing the public about what we're asking them to pay for – let's be fair and establish credibility with them by providing good information. The research HNTB and other organizations have conducted tells us that Americans believe our national infrastructure is crumbling, and they are willing to spend more of their tax dollars to fix it. They also recognize that improving infrastructure creates jobs and improves the quality of life. But, they're not sure what they're getting for their money

because they have been misinformed on many fronts, including the efficacy of state and federal gas taxes – monies which in some cases are being diverted to discretionary funds instead of being used for transportation as intended.

- We're a fragmented industry when it comes to political action and that absolutely has to change. If the industry can't effectively work together to affect policy, how do we expect to have a coalition with political action committees that are going to make it work? A coordinated effort to erase the barriers that separate the interests of the various modalities, along with an innovative spirit, resources, experience and energy of an industry coalition can make political action work and win support from the public.
- We need strong leadership to help expand and educate our audience. We won't be successful if we only continue talking to ourselves. Persistent misinformation, mistrust and a lack of vision could threaten long-term transportation funding. We have to engage and inform the public of the scale of the problem and convince them to invest in a national integrated transportation plan so this country will know what it's going to build in 10 years.

Action steps

HNTB is working hand-in-hand with clients and industry partners to explore options for improvement. You can help in similar ways:

- Pursue opportunities to continue the dialogue across transportation modes and advocate for change.
- In conjunction with national associations, become active politically at the local, state and federal levels. Call, visit and send letters to policy makers insisting that we change our approach and begin working together to create a well-balanced, well-funded, multimodal transportation network.
- Work to elect leaders who share a positive vision for our country's infrastructure, understand the urgency and are willing to take the lead.

Find resources to support your efforts at ARTBA.org, ACEC.org, uschamber.com/Ira and HNTB.com.

HNTB expert contact information:

Paul Yarossi

President
HNTB Holdings Ltd
(212) 594-9717
E-mail: pyarossi@hntb.com

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