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We finally have a transportation bill. And it has real merit.

Let's build on this momentum to achieve sustainable transportation funding

Washington's recent delivery of a long-term transportation funding package took many by surprise - even though it had taken a decade to arrive.

Signed into law by President Obama on Dec. 4, 2015, the *Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act* is poised to provide \$305 billion in funding over five years. Beyond helping to pay for highways, the funding authorized by the FAST Act will help to build and maintain bridges, transit, rail lines, freight capabilities and ports across the nation.

This new bill marks the end of a frustrating series of stopgap funding measures - more than 30 across the past decade - that underscored divisions in Congress and the political toxicity of trying to increase infrastructure investment in a slumping economy.

Positive step

As the President and many others have noted, the bill is not perfect, but it is a very positive step for America's transportation system, and laudable for many reasons. Here are just a few of the important benefits that will flow from the bill:

- **Greater funding predictability for states** - The bill is fully funded for five years, which gives state transportation leaders a predictable flow of federal money as they envision, plan, design and build infrastructure. An earlier version of the bill, which spanned six years but established funding for only two years, would not have provided the same financial platform for the states. The importance of this funding certainty cannot be overstated: states rely on federal funds for 52 percent, on average, of their highway and bridge capital investments.
- **Bolstered freight funding and strategy** - New or expanded programs aim to ease the movement of freight across the nation. These include funding for improvements to interstate highways and bridges frequently used for freight, as well as to freight rail infrastructure, ports, and intermodal facilities. The bill creates a new National Highway Freight Program to create and advance a national freight policy, as well. These steps are critical to achieve greater economic growth and international competitiveness.
- **Acceleration of disruptive technologies** - The new law will provide substantial grants for new technologies that can reduce traffic congestion and improve safety, specifically mentioning autonomous vehicles and

collision avoidance technologies. These investments will accelerate the already brisk pace of innovation to deliver the benefits of disruptive technologies to more communities: more efficient use of existing roads, shorter travel times, and fewer road deaths.

Sustain the momentum

These aspects of the bill - funding predictability, a focus on freight, and inspiration for rapid innovation - represent key drivers for creating a stronger, safer transportation system in the years ahead. But, by no means does the FAST Act represent a comprehensive funding solution. The funding levels it provides are modest, and the nation's existing infrastructure alone will demand ever-greater investments as deterioration of aging roads and bridges accelerates in the years ahead.

We must meet this maintenance challenge, even as we strive to build for the future. It falls to all of us - industry experts, political leaders, state transportation officials and communities - to sustain the momentum created by the new bill. With a sense of cooperation, and a commitment to even greater investments, we can enjoy the economic vitality, mobility, safety and quality of life that a world-class transportation system provides.

About the author

Ananth Prasad is transportation practice leader for HNTB. With more than 24 years of experience in the transportation industry, he develops and directs strategies that enhance the firm's service to state departments of transportation across the country. Prior to joining HNTB, Prasad spent 22 years with the Florida Department of Transportation, where he most recently served as secretary.

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