Opinion: Infrastructure should be top of Seattle-area’s to-do list

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Across the country, the sixth annual National Infrastructure Week is bringing together hundreds of organizations and thousands of leaders, uniting around one message: The future won’t wait. Neither can we. It’s #TimeToBuild.

We must elevate infrastructure as a critical issue impacting America’s economy, society, security and future. By shining a spotlight on the importance of maintaining and building infrastructure — roads, bridges, rail, ports, airports, water and sewer systems, energy, and more — we can assure that our economy remains competitive, prosperous and solid.

We know very well the importance of continuing to forge ahead with Seattle’s most important infrastructure projects, which are only possible by uniting leaders in both the public and private sector to address the key issues with funding, developing and maintaining infrastructure.

Because Seattle is among the fastest-growing metro areas in the nation, gaining more than 1,000 new residents per week, investment in our infrastructure must be at the top of the regional to-do list.

In November 2016, voters took a bold step by passing Sound Transit 3 (ST3). The $53.8 billion ST3 plan will expand the existing Link light rail system to Tacoma, Federal Way, Everett and Issaquah, as well as connect Ballard to West Seattle.

It will expand the network to include 62 miles of additional light rail serving 37 new stations; and the entire system would carry an estimated 600,000 daily passengers. A Sounder commuter rail extension to DuPont and bus rapid transit lines on SR522 and I-405 are also part of the package.

As well, Gov. Jay Inslee and Washington’s legislators made a critical investment in key corridors that improves freight mobility with key funding in our state’s multimodal transportation system with the Connecting Washington funding package. The $16 billion, 16-year investment enhances the statewide transportation system and maintains critical infrastructure.

We are also on the verge of seeing the completion of the new SR99 tunnel, the largest machine-bored tunnel in the world. Designed for vehicles traveling at 50 mph, the two-deck, two-mile tunnel will enable the city to remove the Alaskan Way Viaduct and prepare for a new beautiful waterfront.
These are steps in the right direction. However, we must continue to encourage innovators from the public and private sectors to invest in new projects, policies and technologies to keep our transportation network strong, reduce congestion and carbon emissions, create jobs and improve mobility.

Those of us who chose careers in this industry know what needs to be done to address aging and obsolete infrastructure and to make strategic improvements that can and will benefit future generations. However, we need the means to deliver it.

Paying for critical infrastructure depends on developing a steady and dependable funding stream at the federal, state and local level, and the participation of the private sector. With adequate funding, our current and future regional infrastructure investments can propel us to a new level of performance, rather than simply catching up to where we should have already been.

Infrastructure is the rare bipartisan issue that can truly bring Americans together, especially among business, labor and public-sector officials from across the country who can unite around solutions to our infrastructure challenges — from funding and financing and the role of the federal government, to technology, innovation and sustainability.

However, it should be underscored that the funding needed to address aging and obsolete infrastructure, as well as improvements to provide adequate mobility for people and goods, far outstrips what is available at the federal, state and local levels.

Our region has demonstrated the bravery and foresight of people who believe in leaving our region better than the one we inherited. We must continue to address bipartisan infrastructure, where all the critical stakeholders can work together to develop solutions to our most pressing infrastructure challenges.

Infrastructure Week will help bring together people who have taken remarkable actions in their cities and states — including right here in Washington — to build support for needed infrastructure improvements that have significantly enhanced their existing systems and reaped the positive results.

This provides a vital opportunity to take the lessons learned from their experiences and factor them into policy at the federal level. That focus must be ongoing.