

The State of American Infrastructure

RACHEL MACCLEERY MAY 09, 2012 2 COMMENTS



Shutterstock



47



77



5



A growing number of American states and metropolitan areas understand that their competitive position and quality of life depends on investing both in growing infrastructure backlogs and cutting-edge opportunities. They know that to succeed in the global marketplace, and compete successfully for jobs and residents, they must build 21st century infrastructure. Self-interest, disciplined by scarce resources, is spurring entrepreneurial metro regions to experiment with new approaches, create new partnerships, and connect the infrastructure dots in innovative ways.

The Urban Land Institute, in partnership with Ernst & Young, tracks global trends in infrastructure. In our annual reports, we've emphasized the need for the country to take infrastructure seriously. [Infrastructure 2012: Spotlight on Leadership](#) [PDF], released today, shows how many metropolitan areas are demonstrating infrastructure leadership, and explores the new infrastructure connections metros around the country are making.

Connecting funding with a positive vision for the future. Many metropolitan regions are appealing directly to voters to allocate new resources for transit and road investments, often in the form of property or sales tax increases. Even during the heart of the recession, these efforts have been successful. ULI analysis of data from the [Center for Transportation Excellence](#) indicates that between 2008 and 2011, 64 percent of ballot measures funding transportation passed.

By painting a picture of a more interconnected, sustainable future and emphasizing benefits to individuals, successful ballot campaigns convince voters of the value of investing in their communities. When voters know what they are buying, and believe in its worth, they are more likely to commit resources. Strong champions are a crucial part of the puzzle.

Infrastructure 2012 highlights the successful campaign for 2008's Measure R in Los Angeles County, which is funneling \$40 billion into a long list of transit and road improvements to be built over 30 years. Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa was a strong supporter of Measure R, and is now seeking ways to deliver the projects in 10 years, rather than 30. Oklahoma City has also found a formula for success in its Metropolitan Area Projects series, which is channeling resources into a variety of urban priorities. In late 2009, voters approved a third temporary sales tax increase, which will collect \$777 million over eight years and fund riverfront upgrades, a new grand central park, and 57 miles of recreational trails.

Connecting regions and forging partnerships: Metropolitan regions are realizing that cooperation across political boundaries is imperative. While promising, these efforts remain works in progress. *Infrastructure 2012* shares the story of a bi-state coalition spanning Connecticut and Massachusetts, where "Knowledge Corridor" leaders are working to leverage significant academic and research assets, a \$4.2 million HUD regional planning grant, and hundreds of millions in federal transit and rail funding to forge a more economically robust, sustainable, and transit-oriented future.

In North Carolina's Research Triangle, three counties and two metropolitan planning organizations will need to work together to fund and build a regional transit system. Funding is the next key step. Durham County was the first out of the box, voting to approve a sales tax increase dedicated to transit in 2011, and aspirations now hinge on votes in Wake and Orange Counties, which have yet to be scheduled.

Connecting technology and pricing: Innovations in technology have the potential to enable shifts in the use and pricing of infrastructure in ways we haven't even thought of yet. Technology is allowing regions to utilize pricing signals to eke more efficiency out of existing infrastructure, and to improve the performance of new facilities and help pay for them.

San Francisco, for example, is applying its tech savvy to parking. The city's innovative [SFpark program](#) uses variable pricing and smartphone applications to ensure that parking is available on every block, and that drivers know where those spaces are. SFpark is helping the city better manage parking resources and reduce the need for additional parking facilities. But the program has loftier goals, including reducing congestion, increasing bus reliability, and improving air quality.

Using technology in new ways is a natural in San Francisco, but technology and pricing are being connected across the country. Variably priced tolls, payable by remote transponder, are becoming the norm for new highways and highway expansions.

Connecting infrastructure and land use: Failing to connect land use and infrastructure was never a good idea, but in an age of scarce resources it looks more foolish than ever. More and more metropolitan regions are taking a hard look at not just what infrastructure to build, but where to build it. And land use is itself being looked to as an infrastructure solution.

In Texas, for example, Dallas/Fort Worth is reconsidering expensive and expansive highway projects, in favor of transit and other investments that support the compact living favored by more and more people. Northeastern Illinois's comprehensive water plan, *Water 2050*, seeks to ensure water supplies with strategies that preserve open lands and green space and encourage more compact development.

Infrastructure 2012 doesn't suggest that the picture is all bright. After all, the country's climb out of the recession is slow, many places are struggling to fill budget gaps and fund essential services, and the impact of new local funding approaches—including sales taxes and tolls—on lower income groups is an issue to be watched. But into the country's previously dark and gloomy infrastructure picture, a few rays of light are shining. And as Congress considers a path forward on federal transportation legislation, it might find some inspiration in metropolitan efforts to build and fund the infrastructure of the future.