


Jim Nowlan:Transportation infrastructure our neglected crown jewel

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Transportation infrastructure is our crown jewel, sparkling atop the lid on Illinois' economic development toolkit. Neglect the jewel, and it might just slip off. And we are neglecting it.

Illinois has more miles —2,200 — of interstate highways than all states but Texas and California. Just look at a highway map. The density of interstates crisscrossing Illinois stands out, in stark contrast to the road systems of our neighbors.

The interstates and 12,000 miles of federal and state two-lane highways in our state make it efficient for you and me to get around. More important, the ribbons of concrete move the goods we produce to a big swath of the nation, in just a day.

Add the following: The nation's seven major railroads all flow into and out of metro-Chicago, and several go into the metro-St. Louis region; East and West Coast railroads come together in these cities.

The president of the Union Pacific Railroad recently observed that 25 percent of all rail cargo in the nation originates, terminates and passes through Chicago.

A recent study by MIT found O'Hare Airport to have the best domestic, as well as international connections of any airport in the nation.

And, of course, water transportation: Lake Michigan, the Mississippi, Illinois and Ohio rivers course through and around our state, carrying our grain on majestic barges to the world.

In the three-state metropolitan Chicago region, with its 11 million people, suburban commuter rail, plus the trains and buses of the Chicago Transit Authority, make it possible for most who wish to get to work without an auto. Try that in Atlanta, Dallas and most cities.

Located in the heart of the heartland, Illinois and its transportation infrastructure are the envy of the nation.

Yet, we neglect it.

For example, according to a recent projection by the Illinois Department of Transportation, in 2026, less than half our 7,000 miles of federal two-lane highways will be in acceptable condition; and only about 30 percent of our state-marked highways will be up to snuff. Your rides will be getting much rougher, readers.

Illinois has not had a major transportation funding program since 2008. Did I mention neglect above?

For decades, the standard funding source for capital investments in transportation has been the motor fuel tax. Although more reliable than video poker (a highway funding source), the inflation-

Illinois has not raised the MFT from the flat rate of 19 cents per gallon in more than 28 years. Since that time, road construction costs have soared, while gas tax revenue has been stagnant.

Since 2013, 24 states have raised or reformed their gas taxes, including three that border Illinois. The Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning suggests Illinois might need to increase the tax by 10 to 15 cents per gallon to meet its transportation needs.

For the future (something Illinois leaders never consider), the motor fuel tax is not going to do the job we need done. Fuel efficiency keeps going up, and electric car use also will continue upward.

Looking ahead, we will need some combination of charges for "vehicle miles traveled," congestion pricing, more tolls and auto license fees based on vehicle weight. These are all user-based, which is how we should pay for our expensive, yet invaluable, transportation infrastructure. It ain't free, folks.

The option of charging on the basis of vehicle miles traveled has become a hot potato in the present governor's race. Both major candidates declare they oppose the idea. Yet, it makes sense, and the technology is available. Right now in the metro-Chicago area, wireless windshield transponders tabulate tolls without slowing drivers. Some fear loss of privacy if vehicle activity is tracked. Do you have a cellphone — we already know where you are.

We have to look ahead, and we have to maintain our top-drawer yet neglected transportation infrastructure in Illinois.