

Remarks on Transportation Infrastructure Improvement and Job Growth Legislation

November 2, 2011

Hello, everybody. All right. Thank you so much, everybody. Please have a seat on this beautiful day. It is good to see all these construction workers out.

Of all the industries hammered by the economic downturn, construction has been among the hardest hit. Since the housing bubble burst, millions of construction workers have had to look for a job. So today I'm joining many of these workers to say that it makes absolutely no sense, when there's so much work to be done, that they're not doing the work; not when there are so many roads and bridges and runways waiting to be repaired and waiting to be rebuilt.

One of these potential projects is behind me, just a few miles from the Capitol Building. It's the Key Bridge, one of the five major bridges that connect the Commonwealth of Virginia to Washington, DC. Two of these five bridges are rated "structurally deficient," which is a fancy way of saying that you can drive on them, but they need repair. Nearly 120,000 vehicles cross these two bridges every single day, carrying hundreds of thousands of commuters and families and children.

They are deficient roads, and there are deficient bridges like this all across the country. Our highways are clogged with traffic. Our railroads are no longer the fastest and most efficient in the world. Our air traffic congestion is the worst in the world. And we've got to do something about this, because our businesses and our entire economy are already paying for it.

Give you an example. Last month, I visited a bridge in Cincinnati on one of the busiest trucking routes in America. More than a hundred and fifty thousand vehicles cross it every single day. But it is so outdated that it's been labeled "functionally obsolete." It worked fine when it opened 50 years ago. But today, it handles twice the traffic it was designed for, and it causes mile-long backups. That means that big shipping companies like UPS or FedEx are tempted to change routes, but it turns out that would cost them even more to take the long way. So their trucks, their vans are just sitting there, bleeding money, bleeding time.

Smaller businesses, they don't have a choice. They have to go across these bridges. When a major bridge that connects Kentucky and Indiana was recently closed for safety reasons, one small-business owner whose shop is nearby watched his sales fall 40 percent in just 2 weeks. Farmers, they can lose 5 cents a bushel when a rural bridge closes.

So all told, our aging transportation infrastructure costs American businesses and families about a hundred and thirty billion dollars a year. That's a tax on our businesses; that's a tax on our consumers. It is coming out of your pocket. It's a drag on our overall economy. And if we don't act now, it could cost America hundreds of billions of dollars and hundreds of thousands of jobs by the end of the decade.

So you're paying already for these substandard bridges. You're paying for these substandard roads. You could be paying to make sure that workers were rebuilding these roads, and you would save money in the long term if you did. And I'm speaking to all the American people right now.

Building a world-class transportation system is one of the reasons that America became an economic superpower in the first place. Today, as a share of our economy, Europe invests more than twice what we do in infrastructure; China, more than four times as much. Think about that. Europe invests, as a percentage of its overall economy, twice as much in roads and bridges and airports and ports; China, four times as much.

How do we sit back and watch China and Europe big—build the best bridges and high-speed railroads and gleaming new airports, and we're doing nothing, at a time when we've got more than a million unemployed construction workers who could build them right here in America right now?

We're better than that. We are smarter than that. We've just got to get folks in Congress to share the same sense of national urgency that mayors and Governors and the American people do all across the country. I've got to say, we've got some Members of Congress here who get it. Amy Klobuchar from Minnesota, she gets it. She's seen a bridge fall apart in her State. Senator Whitehouse from Rhode Island, he gets it. Congressman Larson from Connecticut gets it. I know the mayor of Washington, DC, gets it. But we've got to have everybody on Capitol Hill get it.

Last month, Republicans in the Senate blocked a jobs bill that would have meant hundreds of thousands of private sector construction jobs repairing bridges like this one. It was the kind of idea that in the past, at least, both parties have voted for, both parties have supported. It was supported by the overwhelming majority of the American people. It was paid for. And yet they said no.

The truth is, the only way we can attack our economic challenges on the scale that's needed is with bold action by Congress. They hold the purse strings. It's the only way we're going to put hundreds of thousands of people back to work right now. Not 5 years from now, not 10 years from now, but right now. It's the only way that we're going to rebuild an economy that's not based on financial bubbles, but on hard work, on building and making things right here in the United States of America.

That's the deal that every American is looking for, that we have an economy where everybody who works hard has the chance to get ahead, where the middle class regains some sense of security that has been slipping away for over a decade now.

So that's why I'm going to keep on pushing these Senators and some Members of the House of Representatives to vote on commonsense, paid-for jobs proposals. In the meantime, while I'm waiting for them to act, we're going to go ahead and do what we can do to help the American people find jobs. We're not going to wait for them and do nothing. I've said that I'll do everything in my power to act on behalf of the American people, with or without Congress.

We can't wait for Congress to do its job. If they won't act, I will. And that's why today I'm announcing that we are actually going to expedite loans and competitive grants for new projects all across the country that will create thousands of new jobs for workers like these. If there's money already in the pipeline, we want to get it out faster. And this comes on the heels of our recent efforts to cut redtape and launch several existing projects faster and more efficiently. See, construction workers, they want to do their jobs. We need Congress to do theirs.

But here's the good news: Congress has another chance. They already voted once against this thing; they've got another chance. This week, they've got another chance to vote for a jobs bill that will help private sector companies put hundreds of thousands of construction workers back on the job rebuilding our roads, our airports, our bridges, and our transit systems.

And this bill, by the way, is one that will begin to reform the way we do projects like this. No more earmarks. No more bridges to nowhere. We're going to stop the picking of projects based on political gain and start picking them based on two criteria: how badly they're needed out there and how much good they'll do for our economy. And by the way, that's an idea that came from the good work of a Texas Republican and a Massachusetts Democrat, because infrastructure shouldn't be a partisan issue.

My Secretary of Transportation, who is here, Ray LaHood, a great man from Peoria—[*applause*]*—*he's the pride of Peoria—he spent a long time in Congress. He's a Republican, member of my Cabinet. He knows how badly we need to act on this issue. The other Members of Congress here, they understand that this is important to their States. I can't imagine that Speaker Boehner wants to represent a State where nearly one in four bridges is classified as "substandard." I'm sure that the Speaker of the House would want to have bridges and roads in his State that are up to par.

When the Senate Republican leader, Mitch McConnell, visited that closed bridge in Kentucky that I was talking about, he admitted, look, "Roads and bridges are not partisan in Washington." That's a quote from him. Paul Ryan, the Republican in charge of the budget process, recently said, "You can't deny that infrastructure does create jobs." Okay, so if the Speaker of the House, the Republican leader in the Senate, all the Democrats all say that this is important to do, why aren't we doing it? What's holding us back? Let's get moving and put America back to work.

The ideas in this legislation are supported by the leading organizations of Republican mayors, supported by Mayor Gray, who's here. The idea would be a big boost for construction and is therefore supported by America's largest business organization and America's largest labor organization. The Chamber of Commerce and the AFL–CIO think this is a good idea to move forward on. And they don't agree on a lot.

And when 72 percent of the American people support the ideas in this bill—72 percent of Americans agree with this, Republicans, Democrats, and Independents—there's no excuse for a hundred percent of Washington Republicans to say no. That means that the Republicans in Washington are out of touch with Republican voters.

We've got to make this happen. Now, if you don't want to take my word for it, take it from one of my predecessors. It's one of the previous Presidents. He said that, and I'm quoting here, "the bridges and highways we fail to repair today will have to be rebuilt tomorrow at many times the cost." He went on to say that rebuilding our infrastructure is "common sense"—that's a quote—and, quote, "an investment in tomorrow that we must make today." That President was Ronald Reagan. We just put up a statue of him at the airport.

Since when do we have Republicans voting against Ronald Reagan's ideas? [*Laughter*] There's no good reason to oppose this bill, not one. And Members of Congress who do, who vote no, are going to have to explain why to their constituencies.

The American people are with me with this. And it's time for folks running around spending all their time talking about what's wrong with America to spend some time rolling up their sleeves to help us make it right. There's nothing wrong in this country that we can't fix. There are no challenges that we can't meet and especially when it comes to building things in America. It was in the middle of the Civil War that Lincoln built the transcontinental railroad. It was during the Great Depression that we built the Hoover Dam that brought electricity to rural America.

We have built things even in the toughest of times—especially in the toughest of times, because it helps us improve our economy. It gets us going. It taps into that can-do American spirit. It gives us pride about what we can accomplish. Now it's our turn to forge the future.

Everybody here, we are Americans. We're not people who sit back and watch things happening. And if Congress tells you they don't have time, they've got time to do it. We've been—in the House of Representatives, what have you guys been debating? John, you've been debating a commemorative coin for baseball? [Laughter] You had legislation reaffirming that "In God We Trust" is our motto? That's not putting people back to work. I trust in God, but God wants to see us help ourselves by putting people back to work.

There's work to be done. There are workers ready to do it. The American people are behind this. Democrats, Republicans, Independents believe in this. These are ideas that have been supported by all those groups in the past. There's no reason not to do it this time. I want you to make sure your voice is heard in the Halls of Congress. I want us to put people back to work, get this economy growing again, and remind the entire world just why it is that America is the greatest country on Earth.

God bless you, and God bless the United States of America.

NOTE: The President spoke at 11:24 a.m. at the Georgetown Waterfront Park. In his remarks, he referred to Mayor Vincent C. Gray of Washington, DC; and Sens. Kathryn A. "Kay" Bailey Hutchison and John F. Kerry.

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Names: Boehner, John A.; Gray, Vincent C.; Hutchison, Kathryn A. "Kay" Bailey; Klobuchar, Amy J.; LaHood, Raymond H.; Larson, John B.; McConnell, A. Mitchell; Ryan, Paul D.; Whitehouse, Sheldon.

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