INFRASTRUCTURE

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 3, 2019, the gentleman from Wisconsin (Mr. GALLAGHER) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the minority leader.

Mr. GALLAGHER. Madam Speaker, I want to talk today about infrastructure, and I start with the confession that I was lied to as a child. In fact, my whole generation was lied to. We were told time and again by nearly every futuristic TV show or movie that by now we would all be traveling around on jetpacks and hoverboards. But we are still waiting.

And while we wait, we have to grapple with the fact that we need to use roads wherever we are going and that our outdated infrastructure is nowhere near where it needs to be.

□ 1715

Few issues we debate here in Washington, D.C., impact the day-to-day lives of our constituents more directly than infrastructure. Yet, fixing our infrastructure has become a running joke, with seemingly every week derisively dubbed infrastructure week.

It may be infrastructure week this week. We don't know. But infrastructure should not be an afterthought or a back-burner priority we deal with only when we have more money—which we don't—or when we are in a true infrastructure crisis. Even in December's $1.4 trillion spending deal, in which seemingly every lobbyist in D.C. got a Christmas present, infrastructure was largely ignored.

Yet, infrastructure should not be impossible to tackle. Even as progress on a comprehensive package has eluded Congress in recent years, we have generated important bipartisan wins, like the 2-year Coast Guard reauthorization and reforms to better utilize the harbor maintenance trust fund to support critical projects at ports nationwide. There are plenty more easy bipartisan wins waiting on the sidelines—such as the Safe Routes Act, the Motorcyclist Advisory Council Reauthorization Act, and the Promoting Women in Trucking Workforce Act—that we could pass in the House tomorrow and make our roads safer and grow our workforce in key industries.

I know these are small fixes that will not solve all of America's infrastructure needs, but they would represent tangible progress in a divided Congress that would improve transportation in communities like mine in northeast Wisconsin. But we can't be content to stop there.

Even though now, in the midst of the craziness that comes with the Presidential election cycle, it is hard to imagine a comprehensive infrastructure bill passing both the House and the Senate, I think we should all agree that does not mean we should punt on thinking through more systemic infrastructure issues.

As we consider how the Federal Government can best support States, set national standards, and promote infrastructure, there are three principles that we should keep in mind.

First, we need to better understand where Federal money goes. Before spending $1 trillion on infrastructure, Congress needs to understand where and how Federal money is being spent. You may ask yourself: Don't we already know that? No, unfortunately, we have shockingly little definitive information about America's infrastructure needs and how much they cost.

Given this opacity, it is no wonder that we often see huge, exorbitant figures quoted for infrastructure costs. For instance, right now, there is no definitive estimate of the cost difference in building a highway with Federal as opposed to non-Federal dollars. This should not be difficult to determine. All it takes is finding projects of similar design and geography and comparing them.

Any Wisconsin family would compare relative costs before a big construction project. Why should the Federal Government be any different?

The problem is that what little topline information we have on highways is based on data from 2007 to 2014. Now, the Federal Highway Administration reports only on what Congress has asked them to report. Up until now, that has not included cost analysis on highway projects. This has to change.

Congress should require the Department of Transportation to compare the costs of projects that use Federal funds and those that don't. We should know the breakdown of costs for planning and design, materials, labor, and compliance to understand how to better protect taxpayer money.

We should also require the Department to compare States so we can see which States are more efficient and figure out why they are more efficient.

What is more, we need up-to-date data on the comparative health of infrastructure across the country. Outside groups can provide a valuable perspective, but it is our responsibility as Congress to ensure we have validated, independent data from the States themselves.

For instance, we frequently hear that America has earned a D-plus grade on infrastructure. That is pretty bad. That is a failing grade on infrastructure, but compared to what standard and to what other country? We should have quantifiable comparisons to other developed nations. Are we getting relative bang for our buck compared to the U.K. or Canada? It is an open question. The answers might help us find efficiencies and new ideas for infrastructure partnerships.

China may have high-speed trains in its coastal cities, but they built them without respect to property rights or the environment. What is their return on investment? Does China have a plan to maintain their system as it decays in coming decades?

Unless we have reliable comparisons with peer nations, ratings that find America has a D-plus in infrastructure lack context, lack meaning, and, therefore, lack all analytical value.

Before we try to prescribe solutions to our infrastructure challenges, we need to get useful, validated data to help us diagnose our problems.

Data is coming to define the modern economy—not jet packs, but data. Therefore, we should be able to fix this stuff. Yet, when it comes to the very engine that literally helps drive our economy from one location to another, we are stuck in the 20th century or even earlier when it comes to measuring need, progress, and required resources.

We have to do better before we sign up for potentially hundreds of billions of dollars in projects.

The second principle is that we need to recognize it is not how much money we spend on infrastructure but how that money is spent. One of the fundamental flaws in our infrastructure policy is that we tend to be enamored with shiny new projects while paying less attention to how we maintain existing roads, bridges, and ports.

The incentives make sense, right? Everyone wants to be there at the ribbon-cutting for a brand-new project, building something new. No one wants to be there at the much less exciting and non-ribbon-cutting ceremony for maintenance we are doing on roads every single day.

But the Department of Transportation's 2019 report to Congress on the status of the Nation's highways, bridges, and transit noted that nearly 60 percent of Federal money spent on highway infrastructure goes to rehabilitating our existing system. Although that sounds substantial, we should remember that the siren call of infrastructure spending in Washington is predicated on fixing our crumbling infrastructure.

If this is the case, then why is Congress not dedicating more resources to maintenance? If we truly want to fix our crumbling infrastructure, then any future infrastructure package must consider the long-term effect of deferring maintenance of existing projects for new construction.

For example, the foundations underneath many of Wisconsin's roads were laid in the 1960s and 1970s and are nearing the end of their lifespans. That means that, in some cases, the foundation of Wisconsin's roads predates Vince Lombardi's victories in Super Bowl I and II.

So why hasn't this been addressed over the years, particularly in the 2009 stimulus, which spent over $100 billion on infrastructure? Rather than focusing on renewing existing roads, the stimulus bill prioritized Federal dollars for ''shovel-ready projects,'' which tend to be new highways, interchanges, and frontage roads. So, despite receiving almost $400 million in highway funds from the 2009 stimulus, Wisconsin's roads are still limping along with aging foundations.

Consider that in a recent report on repair priorities, Transportation for America and Taxpayers for Common Sense found that even after the stimulus, ''The percentage of roads nationwide in poor condition increased from 2009 to 2017.''

After we spent hundreds of billions of dollars on infrastructure, the percentage of roads nationwide in poor condition increased. That should tell you something is fundamentally wrong with our approach.

Strong Towns, an infrastructure resiliency organization, has argued for years that governments need to consider roads as liabilities, not assets, because they eventually must be replaced for large sums of money.

Yet, from 2009 to 2017, we collectively built 223,000 miles of new roads, enough new lane-miles to crisscross the entire country 83 times, which Repair Priorities estimates will cost another $5 billion a year just to keep in good condition. Think about this: $5 billion is about 11 percent of the current size of Federal highway spending.

As Strong Towns asks, if we devoted 100 percent of all government spending to repair, would we even have enough to maintain what we have already built? Probably not. Yet, States, with Federal dollars, are building more.

The principle here is that growth of the system creates a future cost to the system, which explains much of our current infrastructure funding crisis.

Third, and finally, we need to think innovatively about the Federal role in infrastructure. I often hear that our infrastructure spending and programs are stuck in the 1950s. If this is true, then we need to make sure that our infrastructure proposals aren't rehashing spending and regulatory regimes from the 1950s. If we keep putting the same broken inputs into the system, we can expect the same broken result.

The most obvious place to start is funding. We can't just raise the gas tax and throw hundreds of billions of dollars at the problem. That is particularly true if we don't have basic data on the scale of the problem. That is a 1950s way of thinking.

Even beyond the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure's Ranking Member SAM GRAVES' call for proposals transitioning to a vehicle-miles traveled tax, there are plenty of ways that we can think innovatively and escape the prison of the past.

One place to look is the permitting process. Countless billions of dollars are wasted in delays and ridiculous budget overruns caused by a regulatory maze of permitting.

The potential for savings here is tremendous. For example, The New York Times recently reported that it costs the city of New York nearly seven times the cost to build a rail project than similar projects almost anywhere—seven times. When considering that just the first phase of the Second Avenue Subway costs $4.5 billion, even savings of 25 percent would be enormous. There are enormous savings to be found in cutting down on delays and budget overruns.

President Trump's Executive Order No. 13807 streamlines the permitting process by designating one Federal agency as the lead rather than forcing project managers to navigate through a dozen agencies. This should be codified into law.

We also need commonsense reforms, like limiting the length of environmental impact statements to 150 pages, with a time limit of 2 years for their completion. It should not take 10 years to do an environmental review, and no human being is going to read a 3,000-page technical document. We hurt our environment more by dragging the permitting process out for years while more and more cars pile up in traffic.

Another innovative idea comes from our Australian allies. I am proud to chair the Friends of Australia Caucus with my good, Democrat friend, JOE COURTNEY. In 2014, Australia launched an Asset Recycling Initiative, a 5-year program that set aside $3.3 billion in federal funding, which states could access if they sold or leased underutilized public assets to private firms. Money generated from sales or leasing was then reinvested into infrastructure projects at the state level. If states met certain criteria, the federal government would then match those revenues with an additional 15 percent.

Under asset recycling, the untapped value of America's underutilized infrastructure could be recaptured and then recycled into other urgent infrastructure needs. Our Nation has more infrastructure than any other nation, including China. Consequently, we have perhaps untold billions in value frozen in underutilized assets. Leasing or selling these assets to private firms would not only free up that value but also transfer the maintenance costs to private industry.

The potential benefits of this concept are enormous, especially if leveraged toward maintenance and repair of our existing system. In fact, the Trump administration championed this idea by proposing a Federal Incentives Program, setting aside $100 billion to be granted to States and localities that could meet the criteria of asset recycling. The Trump plan proposed a 20 percent Federal match—even higher than Australia's 15 percent.

This was a promising idea that should not simply vanish because infrastructure talks broke down last year between the Speaker and the President. Since the essential problem in infrastructure is how to pay for it, the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure should include programs exactly like these in a future infrastructure package.

□ 1730

Now, I will close shortly. I can see my colleagues who are working on the modernization of Congress, which is essential to fixing the problems I am identifying, are waiting to speak.

But I will close by saying that I am a huge student and fan of Dwight Eisenhower. I spent 3 months of my life in Abilene, Kansas, staying at the Holiday Inn Express, doing research there—very exciting for a man in his twenties. But I like Ike, and I believe, like Ike, that the Federal Government has a role to play in infrastructure.

During the Eisenhower administration, in partnership with Canada, the United States built the Saint Lawrence Seaway. His most ambitious domestic project, the interstate highway program, created a 41,000-mile road system.

When I look at Wisconsin, I see the impact that world-class infrastructure has had in keeping us economically competitive, so there should be no doubt that we need infrastructure.

There should also be no doubt that the current way of delivering, funding, and planning for infrastructure is not working. It is time to bring the way we think about infrastructure into the 21st century.

By focusing on infrastructure transparency and reporting, by repairing what we have first before constructing anew, and by innovating the way we fund and construct infrastructure, we can finally build a sustainable 21st century foundation across the Nation, even as we await the coming of hoverboards and jetpacks.

Madam Speaker, I yield back the balance of my time.

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE MODERNIZATION OF CONGRESS

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 3, 2019, the gentleman from Washington (Mr. KILMER) is recognized for 60 minutes as the designee of the majority leader.

GENERAL LEAVE

Mr. KILMER. Madam Speaker, I ask unanimous consent that all Members have 5 legislative days to revise and extend their remarks and include extraneous material on the subject of my Special Order.

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Is there objection to the request of the gentleman from Washington?

There was no objection.

Mr. KILMER. Madam Speaker, I rise today to speak about the work of the Select Committee on the Modernization of Congress.

As chair, I am extremely proud of what the select committee has accomplished in the past year. I am also proud of how we have accomplished our work.

In addition to unanimously passing 45 recommendations to improve the way Congress works, the select committee is establishing a new and meaningful precedent for bipartisan collaboration.

For those watching on C–SPAN, your television is not broken. We are actually proving that it is possible for Members of Congress from both sides of