

Opportunities for nation building

New APTA chair pulls no punches on public transportation



By Phillip Washington

News analysts and political pundits often refer to “nation building” abroad as a way to protect national security here at home. As a retired U.S. Army noncommissioned officer, I couldn’t agree more. But as a current general manager and CEO of one of the country’s largest public transportation systems—and as chair of the American Public Transportation Association (APTA)—I take issue with that one-dimensional view.

It’s time to do nation building here at home, too. Let’s start with our transportation infrastructure—roads and bridges, to be sure, but also rails and guideways, buses and express lanes, and public transit systems and networks.

The \$61 billion public transportation industry—U.S. public transit agencies and the extensive global supply chain of private-sector businesses and investors that support them—is a proven nation builder.

Strengthening our transportation infrastructure is a matter of national security and economic survival. Here are the facts:

- Every \$1 invested in public transportation agencies generates \$4 in economic returns. That’s an ROI of 300%;
- Every \$1 billion invested in public transportation leads to more than 50,000 jobs. Good jobs in every imaginable field, from construction to

accounting and information technology;

- The industry employs more than 400,000 people;
- Every \$10 million in public transportation operating investment yields \$32 million in increased business sales;
- In my home city of Denver and the surrounding metro area, we have created 10,300 jobs, injected \$5 billion into the local economy, increased opportunities for transit-oriented communities, and increased ridership by some 20% over the last 10 years. Additionally, we have tracked new development within a half-mile of future and existing rapid transit stations. The following quantities of residential, commercial and institutional development were completed between 2006 and 2013: 12,013 residential units, 2,190 hotel rooms, 3 million sq ft of retail space, 4.8 million sq ft of office space, and 7.8 million sq ft of institutional space. I can’t help but think that this can be replicated around the country if we have renewed and focused transportation infrastructure investment; and
- Let’s not forget the human side of this nation building: Public transit makes it possible for 39 million Americans with disabilities to be more independent. People board our trains and buses 35 million times every weekday. Last year, riders of all ages and backgrounds took 10.7 billion trips on public transportation—the most in 57 years.

But instead of investing in infrastructure and building our nation, we face an \$86 billion infrastructure deficit in public transportation alone. That’s a deep hole. And in recent years, Congress has authorized short-term patches instead of the multiyear, sustainable investment that will yield multiyear, sustainable gains. It’s like

ignoring the “change oil” warning light on your dashboard for decades and still expecting your car to run.

We can and must do better. Truth is, we all know it, from President Obama who called for increased investment in the Grow America Act to DOT Secretary Foxx who once said that 100,000 of our bridges are old enough for Medicare to governors and legislators in 12 states who have enacted tax increases since 2012 to fund public transportation to millions of voters nationwide. In fact, some 72% of Americans have supported local transportation ballot measures since 2000, including in the most recent election, according to the Center for Transportation Excellence, which tracks such results. That’s a landslide by any count.

So how do we move forward?

APTA is calling for a day of advocacy, Stand Up for Transportation Day, on April 9, when we collectively shine a bright light on the value of our industry to local, state and national economies, to city and neighborhood development and to individual lives and whole communities.

Stand Up for Transportation will focus on one goal and one message to exhort our elected leaders to act in the best interest of our country, set aside partisanship, and fix our aging and overburdened transportation network.

I encourage you to join us. Partner with your community’s public transit system and call for the transportation investment we need to build our nation. If you need more information, contact me at aptachair@apta.com.

The U.S. has been on a 30-year infrastructure vacation. It’s way past time for our national elected leaders to return from that vacation and get back to work.

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