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Who will put America Back Together Again?

Chicken Little was on to something. Although the sky isn't falling just yet, there are other components of America's infrastructure that are failing badly. From collapsing interstate bridges and near-misses at overcrowded airports, to vulnerable electrical and water networks, U.S. infrastructure is in poor shape. Just recently, all air traffic within 250 miles of Memphis was shut down for several hours because of a computer failure. Inadequate infrastructure costs American workers and businesses time and money, leads to inefficiencies, and restricts our ability to engage productively with the global economy. Without significant investment in infrastructure over the next decade, the U.S. could face a serious economic downturn and a loss of global competitiveness.

Transportation infrastructure stands out as a critical component of the nation's economic engine. Transport facilitates accessibility and mobility, it enables social and economic interaction, and it shapes the geographies of people and places in productive ways. Without adequate transport infrastructure, societies and their economies cannot interact and use capital in ways that add value and create opportunities. Countries like Haiti, Afghanistan, and Burkina Faso sit at the bottom of the global development rankings in part because they have inadequate infrastructure to drive socio-economic growth. In contrast, economies such as the U.S., Germany, and Japan grew impressively after World War II because of significant investment in transportation and communication infrastructure. Unfortunately, the U.S. has not sustained this level of infrastructure investment in recent years.

Emerging economies like China and India, as well as regional blocs like the European Union, recognize the value of new or rehabilitated infrastructure in enhancing national and international development. From building new airports and high-speed rail networks to paving dirt roads and facilitating better communication, economies on the move are investing in the infrastructure needed to engage more productively in regional and global activities. Yet although transport infrastructure is necessary for development, it is not sufficient. Countries also need good planning, meaningful education systems, and a desire to improve individual accessibility and mobility for the benefit of the larger society. The U.S. is failing in many of these areas, but most importantly in the provision of adequate transport infrastructure.

Across the U.S., the aviation system is on life support. Inadequate investment in new runways, computer systems, global positioning technology, and air traffic control networks has stretched the existing system to its limit. Despite the efforts of the professionals who run the system, the risk of collisions, significant delays, and mounting passenger frustrations will continue to grow exponentially. Indeed, the US aviation system is unlikely to cope with projected air traffic growth over the coming decade. On the ground, America's fastest intercity rail service, the northeast's Acela, compares unfavorably to intercity rail networks in Europe and Asia, where speeds over 160 miles per hour are routine. Beyond the northeast corridor, U.S. passenger rail services are an embarrassment and exist on minimal funding and outdated equipment.

The U.S. led the world from the 1950s onwards in building a limited-access highway system that connected producers and consumers across the country quickly and efficiently. Yet inadequate investment in repairs and maintenance over the past thirty years has left the national road network vulnerable to collapse – witness recent bridge failures in Minnesota and elsewhere. Poor highway maintenance also contributes to accidents that take lives and destroy property,

costing the U.S. billions of dollars annually in lost productivity and the immeasurable damage to families and communities.

Transportation infrastructure must take center stage in U.S. efforts to become more nationally and globally competitive. From the president and the Congress down to local governments and business leaders, our nation needs strong and imaginative leadership that will build and repair infrastructure. Anything less will condemn America to an ineffectual role in an expanding global economy, to a deep and damaging economic downturn, and to a resulting decline in overall quality of life. The sky isn't falling yet, Chicken Little. But it will without meaningful and widespread investment in infrastructure now and in the future.

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