MOVING RIGHT ALONG

Is anybody there?

The musical “1776” depicts the challenges of the Continental Congress as it debated the issue of independence. The last song of the show, “Is Anybody There?” reads from a dispatch sent by General Washington to Congress, inquiring why it had not responded to his previous 15 missives.

Washington’s deep frustration is expressed by his question: Is anybody there — does anybody care? The same song might be sung to today’s Congress and administration. The transportation industry has certainly sent more than 15 requests and notices of its concern.

To our musical question, we might add in for extra measure a new mantra: It’s the Network. Transportation is an asset-based, network-operating business. It has many moving parts that are owned and operated by a plethora of participants. Yet signs abound that the infrastructure supporting the networks is no longer viable. Consider some headlines from the summer of 2006.

In mid-July, a Boston tunnel collapse killed a woman, when a three-ton concrete slab fell on her car as she headed to Logan Airport. Unfortunately, this was not an isolated problem. The Big Dig consumed nearly $15 billion over the past 15 years reconstructing the central Boston highway network. Although the project had very elegant engineering, the construction performance was standard almost from the start. There were leaks, cost overruns and delays. Now the design and construction have been called into question.

The Big Dig shows how expensive it can be to retrofit highways. The $15 billion was spent for only 7.5 miles — $2 billion a mile. The most expensive project ever, the Big Dig was only accomplished by extensive earmarks delivered by the Massachusetts congressional delegation. The effectiveness of this funding methodology is, at the very least, questionable.

This summer’s celebration of the interstate highway system’s 50th anniversary only serves to highlight how the highway program has morphed from construction to maintenance and repair.

In August, an extended heat wave across large parts of the U.S. put incredible strains on its electrical grid. This year, failures have been limited to scheduled, rolling blackouts. The system east of the Rockies seems to have been strengthened after the nation’s worst-ever blackout in 2003. But most of the changes have been procedural — not involving changes to infrastructure (Today’s system monitoring is much more extensive than in 2003, and better communication methods are in place.)

Process improvements can yield more capacity and improved reliability, but it only defers the need for more network infrastructure as demand continues to climb. And recent weather patterns would seem to mandate the inclusion of climate change considerations in our planning.

Safety and security issues affect system capacity and availability. Government scrutiny today is increasing. In early August, BP began shutting down the nation’s largest oil field after detecting heavy corrosion and a small leak in a critical pipeline serving Prudhoe Bay. The affected fields represent 8 percent of U.S. production.

The pipeline problems were detected only after extensive tests were ordered by the federal government following a spill in March.

In June, the Council of Supply Chain Management Professionals released its 17th Annual State of Logistics Report. The results were dism al. Costs were up across the entire logistics’ industry spectrum because of increased transportation expense and interest rates. Under the pressure of rising rates and fuel surcharges, transportation costs increased 14.1 percent.

Inventory costs rose 17 percent over the previous year — the result of shippers holding more inventory to accommodate the vagaries of transportation service. Nobody is expecting the supply-chain efficiencies, which have supported economic growth over the past 25 years, to resume.

The CSCMP report predicts a looming transportation crisis because of a lack of adequate capacity and exacerbated by a weakened infrastructure. The energy outlook is worrisome, and our nation faces increased risk of terrorism and natural disaster. The Department of Transportation has undertaken several initiatives, such as development of national freight policy and attacking congestion, but the lack of effective advocacy on Capitol Hill and from the White House is a show-stopper.

The transportation industry — and large parts of the economy — are speaking up. We can only hope that somebody there is listening.

Theodore Prince is vice president, intermodal, at Kansas City Southern. He can be contacted at theodore.prince@kcsr.com.