One session at last month’s Intermodal Expo and Transcomp, addressing rail capacity, was standing room only. While randomly citing attendance at a single event is hardly an acceptable polling method, the turnout seems to indicate that sufficient capacity is of great interest to transportation users and providers.

This event took place against the backdrop of November’s midterm election. Iraq certainly proved to be a main theme, but political pundits have cited a number of other reasons for voters rejecting the Republican Party. One frequently discussed issue is the rise of “big government conservatives” — along with the corruption fostered in the appropriations process. Last year’s surface transportation bill, SAFETEA-LU, has become a poster child for what’s wrong with the process. The bill contained no fewer than 6,371 earmarks. To some, each earmark represents a conscious decision to waste taxpayer dollars — because it funds projects unable to withstand cost-benefit review. Asked to explain the president’s acceptance of a bill so counterintuitive to his avowed philosophy, a White House spokesman pointed out that the legislation was cheaper than the 2003 Medicare reform. The Washington Post observed, “This is a classic case of defining deviancy down.”

The “Bridge to Nowhere” — an unnecessary $223 million bridge connecting a small Alaskan town to a tiny island — became the symbol for SAFETEA. The Heritage Foundation labeled the project “A National Embarrassment” calling it “an object of national ridicule and a symbol of the fiscal irresponsibility of many in Congress toward the money entrusted to them by the taxpayers.”

But are all the earmarks unnecessary? Any view the Heartland Corridor — designated a project of national and regional significance under SAFETEA — as a worthy project. This public-private partnership leveraged a $44.4 million investment from Norfolk Southern in the Central Corridor Double Stack Initiative to obtain an additional $105.6 million in public funding (including a $90 million SAFETEA earmark). The endeavor will clear the rail corridor for double-stack trains, build three intermodal terminals and construct highway-railway infrastructure in Hampton Roads.

Yet, to many in the transportation industry, the Heartland Corridor is a “good news-bad news” story. The funding is good news for the railroad industry. The bad news is that the CREATE (Chicago Region Environment and Transportation Efficiency) project received less funding than anticipated.

CREATE is a partnership between the state of Illinois, the city of Chicago, Metra and six Class 1 railroads. The public-private partnership is seeking to invest $1.5 billion in rail infrastructure. It sought to remedy 150 years of piecemeal construction around Chicago through improved signaling, separation of passenger and freight rail operations, and reduction of rail crossings.

CREATE was to be funded by various public and private entities. But while SAFETEA was expected to contribute $800 million to $900 million, only $100 million was actually provided. Still, CREATE has $330 million pledged, allowing Phase 1 to move forward.

As freight traffic continues to grow, infrastructure challenges will only increase in number. The rail industry already spends more on capital than most comparable industrial companies. No single model of public-private partnerships exists — or is necessary. All aspects of the freight system are not equal. And no two generate identical solutions.

For this reason, regional initiatives such as CREATE and the Heartland Corridor, which seek achievable short-term goals and are designed to eliminate bottlenecks and make efficient use of existing capacity, should be promoted. Such plans must have meaningful local and private funding prior to federal funding being added.

The means of private and non-federal funding may be expanded. The Freight Rail Infrastructure Capacity Expansion Act was proposed to provide a 25 percent tax credit. States and regions are considering bonds and other funding to provide necessary funds. This is welcome news, but the time from idea to reality is lengthy — and the demands on the system are growing daily. We cannot afford to wait another election cycle.

Providing transportation infrastructure has always been one of the most democratic functions of government. Let’s see if the Democrats can help deliver a viable solution.

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