In a recent New York Times column, Paul Krugman submitted that, “What a candidate says about policy, not the supposedly revealing personal anecdotes political reporters love to dwell on, is the best way to judge his or her character.” His point was that most presidential candidates have said nothing substantive regarding policy. Posturing on issues (such as who can be “toughest” on terrorism) is no replacement for articulating what they actually plan to do.

For those of us in the transportation industry, the health-care crisis in this country is particularly illustrative, given the recent I-35W bridge collapse in Minneapolis. Just a month before, in Cleveland, President Bush explained why he was planning to veto a bill extending health insurance to uninsured children. “I mean, people have access to health care in America,” he said. “After all, you just go to an emergency room.” Most economists agree that emergency room visits are not a cost-effective way to deliver health care. On average, they cost nearly five times more than a visit to a doctor’s office — and they ignore any preventive care that could reduce overall expense.

The proposed solution to the I-35W bridge collapse is just like an emergency-room solution. Most experts agree that emergency room visits are not a cost-effective way to deliver health care. On average, they cost nearly five times more than a visit to a doctor’s office — and they ignore any preventive care that could reduce overall expense.

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Most experts agree that a piecemeal approach to infrastructure failure is impractical and expensive. The problem is clearly one of funding. When the interstate system was created just over 50 years ago, the focus was on construction. The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 committed the federal government to paying 90 percent of the cost to build the interstate system — whatever the cost turned out to be. However, it continued the practice of not paying for highway maintenance. Since 1916, states have been responsible for maintenance because they owned and operated the roads.

By 1976, although the need for federal maintenance support was clear, funding was elusive. In June 1982, a Congressional Budget Office report stated, “Unlike completion of the planned interstate system, for which there is a history of strong legislative commitment, reconstruction projects are often of lesser national importance, and there is less support for them. The inadequacy of current authorizations to fund all reconstruction projects reflects a federal policy of providing partial rather than full assistance for such activities.”

Finding sufficient money for maintenance has only become more difficult. The most recent surface transportation funding bill, SAFETEA-LU, was enacted nearly two years after the expiration of TEA-21 — and endured 12 stop-gap extensions as Congress tried to respond to White House veto threats.

In the wake of the recent bridge collapse, political responses abound. In Congress, Democrats lament infrastructure funding shortfalls that could have been fully funded by a fraction of the amount spent on the war in Iraq. In Minnesota, Gov. Tim Pawlenty likely regrets his comment, “How dumb can they be?” (referring to lawmakers who approved a five-cent gasoline tax hike to fix the state’s roads) as he vetoed a state transportation funding bill. (Since the bridge collapse, Pawlenty has apparently had a “Road to M innapolis” epiphany, and is willing to reconsider his opposition.)

Eerily, mere hours before the bridge collapsed, Sens. Chuck Hagel, R-Neb., and Christopher Dodd, D-Conn., introduced the National Infrastructure Bank Act of 2007, to create an independent national bank to help finance infrastructure projects of regional and national significance. Qualifying projects would include publicly owned mass transit systems, roads, bridges, drinking water and wastewater systems, and housing. Funding would be accomplished by selling long-term bonds, guaranteed by the federal government, which would provide tax credits — rather than interest to bondholders.

The Hagel-Dodd bill represents a rational, bipartisan approach to our infrastructure crisis. Although it does not pay interest, there is a taxpayer cost in the credits. Regardless, it seems obvious that money must be found. Our nation’s infrastructure supports our economy and national security. It must be protected. These recent failures of infrastructure may finally force our government to address this critical problem.

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