As the presidential election approaches, Senators Obama and McCain are scrambling to keep up with — and respond to — rapidly changing issues on which voters must judge them. Infrastructure does not appear to be a burning issue. In fact, to find an election that did focus on infrastructure, we must turn to fiction.

In Robert Penn Warden’s political classic, All the King’s Men, Willie Stark, the protagonist, catapults to power by using the issue of inadequate infrastructure. After running — and losing — a campaign during which he warns of incompetent construction of a school, Stark’s career is resurrected when a dozen children are mangled and killed in a tragic collapse of the school’s staircase during a fire drill.

Willie Stark was based on Huey Long, who, as governor of Louisiana, helped create a 20th century infrastructure in his state by building 16,000 miles of roads, 111 bridges and a New Orleans airport and making other physical improvements.

One could draw a loose parallel between Long and today’s Sen. Ted Stevens of Alaska. The development of Alaska has been assisted by federal funding — often sponsored by Stevens — which dwarfs the other 49 states when calculated as a percent of taxes paid.

Stevens’ Alaska connection has been highlighted by the selection of Gov. Sarah Palin as John McCain’s running mate. Palin has been criticized for allegedly lying about her involvement in the infamous “Bridge to Nowhere” in order to align her position with the McCain maverick reformer tag line. (She was for it — then against it when it became politically embarrassing. However, despite Palin’s turning against the bridge, Alaska kept the money allocated for it.)

Gov. Palin has also been criticized for her lobbying efforts to procure federal funds for Wasilla, Alaska, ($27 million while she was mayor) and for Alaska (nearly $200 million for the 2009 federal fiscal year). The McCain-Palin rationalization for such activity is nuanced. Their position seems to be that an “earmark” is an “earmark” only if it is arranged in secret. A public request is evidently not an earmark.

There is another issue with earmarks. Earmarking is controlled by legislators, whereas general appropriations are designated by government officials. This is a challenge for freight transportation, which moves in corridors and networks spanning multiple legislative jurisdictions. Any piecemeal approach makes systematic solutions almost impossible.

Transportation infrastructure poses daunting challenges for the next administration. Surface transportation funding legislation expires next year. How will the federal government respond in a budget environment made almost unthinkable by the demands for rescuing the financial market?

The current administration has followed a path of no new taxes — even as the Highway Trust Fund nears empty because gas tax revenue has not kept pace with inflation and rising demand. Transportation Secretary Mary Peters has advocated private-sector investment as a viable alternative to the government’s historical commitment to supporting transportation infrastructure.

The transportation industry seems genuinely befuddled about the candidates. For example, the trucking industry seems conflicted about Obama’s support of increased highway construction (and infrastructure banks) and McCain’s positions on organized labor and safety.

Obama has staked out positions specifically favoring transportation. He cites the importance of freight rail — and federal funding of the CREATE project in Chicago. He also supports mass transit and Amtrak as solutions to the passenger mobility problem. Perhaps the most intriguing aspects of the Obama policy is his recognition that energy, land use and “smart development” are interwoven into transportation policy.

McCain’s positions are less clear, with his focus on improving the funding process, removing earmarks and reducing the federal government’s role.

The condition of the economy may have a major impact on transportation policy. Historically, infrastructure projects are a favored means of jump-starting the economy. Every billion dollars in spending translates into tens of thousands of construction jobs. The Alameda Corridor only grew from an idea to a reality to address California’s stagnant economy in the early 1990s.

While it is unlikely that transportation will determine many votes on Nov. 4, the victor will have to help manage our industry’s challenges. We can only hope that our industry can effectively articulate its importance, and have that translated into action.

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