IN 1941, Woody Guthrie took a temporary job with the Interior Department's Bonneville Power Administration to promote the benefits of cheap electricity by building dams. In one month, he wrote 26 songs extolling infrastructure built in dire economic times.

As the centennial of Guthrie's birth approaches, his son, Arlo, is planning a major concert tour honoring his father's work. Given the state of our nation's infrastructure and the economy, we might do well to remember these songs, such as “Roll on Columbia,” which harken back to a time when the federal government solved similar issues.

Arlo Guthrie might want to include Bruce Springsteen, an aficionado of Woody Guthrie's work. That might sway one particular major Springsteen fan toward governing infrastructure. In October, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie (who reportedly has attended 122 Springsteen concerts) halted the largest infrastructure project in the country: a proposed rail tunnel under the Hudson River.

The outcry was immediate. “The railroad tunnel was the kind of infrastructure project that used to get done in the United States almost as a matter of routine. It was a big and expensive project, but the payoff would have been huge,” New York Times columnist Bob Herbert wrote.

The tunnel project offers many lessons. First, it’s a reminder of the infrastructure crisis facing our country. There isn’t enough capacity to handle all the passengers moving between New York and New Jersey today — and the volume is expected to double in the next 20 years. This tunnel was contemplated for decades, yet it began only two years ago. It was to be completed in 2018.

The project also illustrates the challenge of funding transportation corridors that cross multiple jurisdictions. This has always been a problem for freight, which frequently moves globally, but it exists in passenger transit as well. The tunnel was estimated to cost $8.7 billion, of which the federal government and the Port Authority of New York and Jersey were to contribute $3 billion apiece. The remaining $2.7 billion was to come from the state of New Jersey.

Equity issues (which haunt projects that involve more than one payer) arose, however. Fearing New Jersey would be left solely responsible for cost overruns, Christie canceled the project. His staff estimated total costs could run from $11 billion to $14 billion. Many believe his action to be justified, because New Jersey was unfairly burdened in comparison to New York. The latter was not directly funding the project, yet it would receive all the tax revenue from New Jersey workers commuting into New York City.

The tunnel endeavor also underscored urgent fiscal challenges facing most states. Speculation abounds that Christie plans to reallocate some of the state's $2.7 billion tunnel commitment to more immediate transportation requirements. The state's repair fund for roads and bridges was close to zero, and he has ruled out raising New Jersey's gas tax — one of the lowest in the country — to generate funding.

The tunnel highlighted the issue of how to optimize transportation networks. Even to its proponents, the tunnel was not an elegant solution, because it would not have connected to Penn Station, the main public transportation conduit in and out of Manhattan. Instead, it required building a new station nearby.

New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg wants a new proposal that reflects more enlightened transportation thinking. He proposes extending the No. 7 subway line to Secaucus, N.J., already a major passenger intermodal hub. This would be the first subway extension outside New York City, and would provide New Jersey commuters with direct access throughout the city. Future implications for regional intermodal mobility are staggering.

It is also reinforces that design specifications are always more expensive than performance-based requirements. At 50 percent of the estimated original tunnel cost, the mayor's solution would expand a regional transportation system facing capacity problems. It also would double the number of trains traveling between the two states during peak demand times. And, it's believed to have a more predictable price, because it would eliminate extensive tunneling in Manhattan by using a subway station already being built one block from the Hudson River.

An infrastructure crisis threatens to place our nation under an even greater burden. Sustained infrastructure investment not only will provide immediate economic growth, but it also will provide the foundation for ongoing prosperity. To galvanize public opinion on this issue, however, we need leadership that can get beyond its current tunnel vision. 

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