NOT ONLY DO WE NEED MORE CAPACITY, BUT WE ALSO NEED TO TEND TO INFRASTRUCTURE THAT IS BECOMING STRUCTURALLY DEFICIENT.

The first risk is the current view of government. The Tea Party has made “Constitution-worship” a key part of its platform, with a view that the founding fathers sought to restrict the power of the central government, to protect rights of the states. That isn’t what history tells us. Rather, the Constitution implemented a strong federal government to replace a fractious — and unworkable — system of state governments originally enshrined in the Articles of Confederation.

Our transportation industry grew with active support of the federal government. Although state and local governments and private investors may have led early movers, large-scale transportation infrastructure was only achieved with massive federal investment. Our network of highways, canals, railroads, ports and airports was built through active federal involvement and funding. In fact, this policy has a legacy worldwide — the Panama Canal, after all, was originally completed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the European rail networks were rebuilt with Marshall Plan funds.

The current legislative gridlock in Congress is delaying funding for many of these modes. The federal priority to build — rather than maintain — infrastructure further burdens our industry. Not only do we need more capacity, but we also need to tend to infrastructure that is becoming structurally deficient.

Unfortunately, transportation doesn’t command much attention in today’s government — other than as a prime source of discretionary funding cuts. Transportation isn’t appreciated as a strategic underpinning of energy, environmental, economic and even foreign policy. As gas prices surge past $4 a gallon, our leaders seem to have forgotten that transportation consumes more than two-thirds of our oil demand.

Unfortunately, U.S. energy policy seems to be afflicted in almost biblical proportions. In the past two years, numerous solutions had their viability threatened by external events: offshore drilling (Deepwater Horizon); nuclear power (Fukushima Daiichi); market solutions (subprime lending); and fuel tax increases (high unemployment and sluggish economic growth).

The latest solutions are under question, too. “Clean coal” relies on technology that doesn’t exist, and natural gas obtained from “fracking” is under attack for alleged environmental damage.

The dispute over climate change renders any attempt at rational energy policy discussion impossible. Although physical scientists have reached a consensus that human activity is influencing climate change, public acceptance — perhaps influenced by the potential costs of resolution — has declined.

And according to a recent study by Jonathon Schuldt of the University of Michigan, 60 percent of Republicans believe in “climate change,” but only 44 percent believe in “global warming.” In contrast, 86 percent of Democrats think climate change is a serious problem, regardless of what it’s called.

The U.S. economy is based on an oil-driven transportation network supporting complex global supply chains. Modal winners and losers aren’t obvious — increased fuel costs, highway congestion and hours-of-service restrictions may impact intermodal drayage disproportionately more than trucks, for example.

Our industry has a history of supporting our nation’s economic growth as well as responding to national emergencies. To continue working toward a “wonderful world,” we need leaders from both parties who are willing to face the facts — and leave the stories to the songwriters.