ROCK HISTORIAN ROBERT Santelli has described Bruce Springsteen's ballad “4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy),” as “the perfect musical study of the Jersey Shore boardwalk culture.” It’s a cruel irony that Hurricane Sandy devastated large parts of the Jersey Shore — and beyond — while killing more than 200 people and causing $60 billion in damage.

The storm hit transportation industry providers hard, and some are still recovering. Our industry eventually may look back at Sandy and mark it as a tipping point. Sandy heightened awareness of climate change and made believers out of many who had been reluctant to embrace the theory.

Bloomberg BusinessWeek declared, “It’s Global Warming, Stupid” on its cover. Although the majority of scientists now believe global warming is real, some still deny it. Regardless, any response to global warming is likely to affect our industry deeply, because of its dependence on fossil fuels as input to production and commodity to be transported.

It’s indisputable that existing storms have become more destructive. Oceans have warmed, so there is more energy, and an atmosphere retaining more moisture has more water available for downpours. What made Sandy unusual was the combination of a traditional Atlantic hurricane colliding with frigid southbound air — a “blocking high” believed to originate from Arctic ice melts.

We’re learning now that New York City could flood routinely. A recent study by climate scientist Michiel Schaeffer projects with short-term policy considerations and costing less than $15 billion rebuilding the 130-mile levee system surrounding the system. Many believe a new generation of infrastructure must be built to protect cities, as was done in Rotterdam, London and Singapore. But how much is enough? When “hundred year storms” are occurring almost every year, it’s easy to envision ongoing demand for more infrastructure.

Some fixes may be fairly simple. There are engineers who believe basic storm drains could protect freight and passenger rail lines. The question of what to build, however, is overtaken easily by consideration of where — or more importantly, where not — to build. Sandy served as a reminder of Katrina’s lessons of the catastrophic impact of lost wetlands.

The chaos surrounding House approval of Sandy relief highlights the funding problem. As is the case with financing for much of our nation’s public infrastructure, the federal government is the primary source of funding recovery from acts of God. This funding is direct and indirect (such as subsidizing flood insurance).

With Washington increasingly viewing discretionary funding through the lens of fiscal cliff, sequesters and debt ceilings, it’s increasingly challenging to manage long-term infrastructure projects with short-term policy attention. The transportation industry is burning the candle at both ends; a failure to adequately maintain existing infrastructure makes the shortage of new infrastructure all the more acute.

Political scientists Andrew Healy and Neil Malhotra, who analyzed data on natural disasters, government spending and election returns, determined that voters reward incumbents for delivering disaster relief spending — but not for investing in disaster preparedness spending — distorting the incentives of public officials. Although they estimated that “$1 spent on preparedness is worth about $15 in terms of the future damage it mitigates,” the government drastically underinvests in disaster preparedness, causing substantial public welfare losses. The same shortsighted approach to transportation funding is well documented.

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Springsteen’s “Sandy” laments “the cops finally busted Madame Marie, for tellin’ fortunes better than they do.” The transportation industry doesn’t need a fortune teller; it needs recognition that it’s an integral part of the environmental and economic success factors for our economy. As such, the United States needs a cooperative and proactive policy that helps maintain a world-class transportation system, and that faces head-on the climate challenges of this new millennium. joc

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