Beyond Traffic

Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O’Brien

Beyond Traffic does a good job painting a picture of the external forces influencing the demand for different kinds of transportation services. These include the growth of megaregions, which are expected to become home to three-quarters of the US population by 2045. The report also analyzes changing needs resulting from generational and demographic trends including an aging population.

Secretary of Transportation Anthony Foxx has been on the stump talking about Beyond Traffic. He’s frank about the shortcomings and dysfunction of our current model for planning, funding and implementing our transportation network. For one thing, it’s hard to be strategic when the system lives or dies with unreliable and inconsistent short term funding fixes and continuing resolutions. We’ve had 32 of them in the past six years. And by not being strategic, we can only react to hot spots, not anticipate the changes coming ahead.

For freight, those changes are likely to be significant. Beyond Traffic predicts a 45% increase in volumes by 2045 and points to other dramatic shifts in the economy that will change the nature of how and why people use transportation. These shifts include an increase in “last mile” home deliveries due to increasing online and m (or mobile) commerce, increased congestion around major airports resulting from airline mergers and the consolidation of hubs, and congestion at other major trade gateways like ports and border crossings thanks in part to increasing vessel size but also the development of megaregions which creates the demand for the goods in the first place. Even the hopes of one of the country’s economic bright spots - domestic energy production - could remain unfulfilled without careful attention to that sector’s infrastructure.

The report recognizes the limitations of the federal government in responding to all of these challenges. And given the fact that the USDOT is in fact-finding mode at this stage of the initiative, the Beyond Traffic report doesn’t pretend to offer a path forward. The final report, which will respond to both expert opinion and general comments, may yet provide something closer to a blueprint. And as we know, with plans the devil is in the details. But it seems like a worthwhile exercise (and appropriate) for USDOT to serve as a convener of disparate stakeholders and facilitate the development of new ideas in the hopes of creating guiding principles that demonstrate the country’s commitment to a world-leading transportation system.

Access to the report can be found at http://www.transportation.gov/BeyondTraffic

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