

July 7-20, 2015

Beyond Traffic



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

It's not uncommon for trade-related professionals, who may disagree on any number of issues, to find common ground on one key thing: the U.S. suffers by not having a national freight strategy. Truckers, rail companies, port labor – that is to say anyone working along the supply chain – recognizes that the ability to compete as a leading trade nation depends upon consistent policies, the development of clearly defined priorities, and constant attention to the state of the infrastructure on which the goods move. The latter also depends upon a regular funding stream.

While shared consensus on the problems at hand - if not the solutions - is only half the battle, it's certainly a start. And it's in part the purpose behind *Beyond Traffic*, which is the title of both a report and an initiative launched by the U.S. Department of Transportation earlier this spring. *Beyond Traffic* advertises itself as “an invitation to the American public—including the users, developers, owners, and operators of the transportation network and the policy officials who shape it—to have a frank conversation about the shape, size, and condition of that system and how it will meet the needs and goals of our nation for decades to come.”

The report is a draft survey of major forces impacting transportation. It attempts to separate fact from fiction when it comes to our understanding of the state of the transportation system in this country. The initiative on the other hand is actually an Internet-driven dialogue focusing on the potential solutions needed to address those forces. It engages all of us as problem-solvers, seeking input on additional trends impacting the movement of people and goods as well as policy options. It also asks for answers to questions that include not only how we move things but how we can move things better, how do we adapt and how do we align decisions and dollars. The input received on the draft report will be used in the preparation of a final document to be released later this year.

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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