

A National Strategy for Freight



■ Trade and Transportation

By Thomas O'Brien

In mid-October the US Department of Transportation released a draft National Freight Strategic Plan (NFSP). The NFSP is a report on the state of the nation's freight system and the challenges confronting it as both the economy and freight volumes grow, as well as an outline of the strategies to be taken to move freight more efficiently while increasing capacity of the many components of the system.

The plan is simply that, a plan. It does not guarantee funding for any one program or establish new regulatory mandates. But it is a major step for the world's largest trading nation which up to now has lacked a clear blueprint for funding, on a consistent basis, our trade infrastructure and eliminating bottlenecks to future growth. This might be one reason why the plan has been greeted with a fair amount of cautious optimism by private freight operators as well as the public agencies responsible for developing parts of the freight system and mitigating the negative impacts of trade on the communities through which it passes.

The NFSP was a requirement of MAP-21, the last federal highway bill, and puts forth key strategies that focus on ensuring dedicated freight funding, identifying the nation's multimodal freight network in a way that helps planners prioritize needed investments, facilitating cross-sectoral and cross-jurisdictional collaboration, unleashing the power of data in the service of goods movement, improving the safety of the system, and developing the next generation freight transportation workforce. Specific objectives and performance measurements are established for economic competitiveness, system efficiency, congestion and environmental mitigation, and system maintenance among others.

The National Freight Strategic Plan makes a strong case for investing in freight systems. It cites figures that demonstrate the economic importance of goods movement. More than 3.1 million Americans are directly involved in freight transport, with over 44 million other jobs made possible by its existence. The report projects that the US economy will double in size by 2045 with an expected increase of more than 40% in freight movements over the same period. Constant attention to the health and well-being of the freight system will be required to accommodate this growth.

The NFSP provides both high level guidance as well as specific recommendations to improve freight flows. For example, as part of a broader recommendation to strategically prioritize technology research and deployment dollars, the report specifically calls for an expansion of electronic manifest systems (a tool used by US Customs and Border Protection) to include information on empty loads. More complete information on this aspect of cross-border trade could help eliminate

bottlenecks at crossings for all freight flows. The plan also calls out the need for more and better truck parking facilities across the country.

Many of the strategies address the need for better coordination across freight operators and among the various agencies with regulatory oversight of the system. These include an expansion of an off-hours delivery pilot program in New York City involving the city's Department of Transportation and private carriers and receivers, and the use of a Permitting Dashboard to track the various permitting processes required for major freight-serving projects. These processes often appear complex, confusing and contradictory to the system user and I expect this strategy to be applauded by the private sector. This group will also be happy to see the NFSP outline the potential benefits of evaluating freight movements from a user perspective, where a system-of-systems approach gets you different results than an assessment constrained by jurisdictional boundaries that reflect planning authority but not necessarily real freight flows.

Not surprisingly I'm personally pleased by the inclusion of workforce development as a strategy to eliminate institutional bottlenecks in the system. Developing freight skills among planning agency staff and helping improve the logistics-related skill sets of returning veterans, both called for in the plan, is something we already do. I am even more pleased by specific reference in the National Freight Strategic Plan to continued support of the national network for the transportation workforce and the five regional workforce centers funded by the Federal Highway Administration, one of which is housed at CSULB, and a renewed emphasis on workforce training and development in the nation's university transportation centers. The latter have traditionally had a research focus.

Of course, all of this requires money. The dedicated funding strategies in the NFSP are more effective as ideas than as steps to implementation at this point. But for those who have been calling for a national freight strategy for the past decade or so, some movement toward developing a national consensus on the importance of the freight system is a good start.

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