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He Didn’t Build That

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According to polls most Americans still don’t approve of the job Donald Trump is doing as President. But they have to be impressed by his recent policy achievements. And as Washington ponders a new program to encourage the construction of roads and bridges, the former real-estate developer would seem to have the perfect set of skills and experience to oversee a building boom. To avoid the mistakes of his predecessor, Mr. Trump will need to prioritize the protection of taxpayers.

This week the Journal reports:

Mr. Trump has been touting an overhaul of the nation’s infrastructure since his campaign began, and the administration considers it one of its top objectives. The White House is readying a $1 trillion plan that includes direct federal spending of around $200 billion, funds they say that would be offset by cuts elsewhere in the federal budget. The rest of the spending would come from cities, states and private investment.

Voters heard a lot about infrastructure from former President Barack Obama, especially when he first took office. Sold as a way to create jobs while making needed transportation improvements and an environmentally sensitive economy, the stimulus plan was drafted in haste by Democrats in Congress and then signed by Mr. Obama on Feb. 17, 2009. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was priced at $787 billion when enacted; the official estimate later soared past $800 billion.

In a 2012 book called “Money Well Spent?,” Michael Grabell of the nonprofit news organization ProPublica noted that only about 10% of the spending, or $80 billion, was devoted to infrastructure—and very little of that total went to critical work. The political necessity to fund the “shovel-ready” projects promised by the president meant that money didn’t go to the bridges most in need of repair but to jobs that could quickly clear the thicket of regulatory permitting. Repaving roads was a typical activity; less than 12% of the infrastructure spending went for work on bridges.

Even with his report of such modest success, Mr. Grabell may still have overstated the case. In 2014 the Obama White House released its own review of its stimulus program. Writing for the Huffington Post, Philip K. Howard decided to find out how much of the money went to transportation infrastructure, based on Team Obama's own data. According to Mr. Howard:

Toward the back of the report (Table 8 on p. 34) there's a chart that gives the number: $30 billion. That's a little more than 3 percent of the total stimulus plan.

Three percent!!

Mr. Howard asked the obvious question: "...how did the headline goal of the stimulus — rebuilding infrastructure — become a small footnote? Because, as Obama subsequently discovered, 'there's no such thing as shovel-ready projects.' The approval process for any significant project (a new road, or power line, or pipeline) approaches a decade, and often longer."

Early this year Sen. Jeff Flake (R., Ariz.) reported on the progress of one high-profile project funded in part by the Obama stimulus plan:

Six years after awarding more than $3 billion to build a high-speed passenger train in California, not a single track has been laid. Billions over budget and years behind schedule, the only thing high-speed about this train is how quickly it is chew chewing taxpayer dollars.

The Fresno Bee noted in September that construction is now under way. But all of the federal stimulus money has been spent and much of the route "remains on the drawing board." The newspaper adds that passenger service won't begin before 2025 and reports:

A combination of delays – from lengthy environmental reviews to protracted lawsuits to the excruciatingly slow pace of buying land for the railroad right of way – have plagued the rail project in the seven years since Joseph Szabo, then-head of the Federal Railroad Administration, visited Fresno in October 2010 to present a ceremonial check for $715 million to the California High-Speed Rail Authority.

As for the current White House quest for new transportation spending, Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute argues that there's little need for an infrastructure blow-out anyway:

Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) data on the nation's bridges show steady gains in quality. Of the more than 600,000 bridges in the nation, the share that are "structurally deficient" has fallen from 22 percent in 1992 to 10 percent in 2015, while the share that are "functionally obsolete" has fallen from 16 percent to 14 percent.

The surface quality of the interstate highways has also improved. Since 1989, the FHWA has reported the International Roughness Index (IRI) for U.S. highways... Federal Reserve economists examining IRI data found that "since the mid-1990s, our nation's interstate highways have become indisputably smoother and less deteriorated," and they concluded that the interstate system is "in good shape relative to its past condition."

Here’s hoping that America’s current developer-in-chief, with his significant experience in private construction projects, will favor the creation of infrastructure *without* public money. Taxpayers have suffered enough.