

THE SUN

Infrastructure proposal won't get us very far

August 3, 2021

Congress is getting ready to finalize the Biden administration's \$550-billion infrastructure bill (\$1.2 trillion, including already approved funding), which the president and lawmakers are pitching as a means to reduce traffic congestion and upgrade our system of roads, freeways, bridges and power grids.

A great deal of the nation's infrastructure is decrepit. The legislation, however, fits the dictionary definition of a boondoggle: "work or activity that is wasteful or pointless but gives the appearance of having value." With all infrastructure bills, the devil is in the line items.

As Politico reported, separate legislation "would erect new bureaucratic hurdles for states seeking to spend federal money on laying asphalt, while steering them to more climate-friendly options like transit." The main bill is awash in transit-friendly components and tilts heavily toward big-city transportation priorities.

"Transit and Amtrak together carried just 1 percent of all passenger travel in 2019, compared with nearly 87 percent by highways (and the rest by air)," noted the Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole. The goal isn't transportation engineering as much as social engineering — e.g., prodding Americans out of their cars and into trains and buses rather than building the roads and freeways that most of us depend upon for our mobility.

One need only look at California for an idea of how this approach could work. California approved a large gasoline tax in 2017 as part of the Road Repair and Accountability Act. The title of law echoed the promises that the governor and lawmakers made at the time. Senate Bill 1 would fix roads and relieve grueling congestion. That pitch explains why voters rejected a ballot measure to overturn the tax hike.

Although the law funded some needed road and freeway projects, its spending tilted heavily toward funding non-traditional projects — and soon afterwards cities such as Sacramento started embracing what are known as "road diets." Instead of adding road lanes, they used newly approved funding to reduce traffic lanes and replace them with bike lanes.

The goal was to promote road safety and encourage people to try transit alternatives. Now this approach could expand nationwide. Transportation engineers refer to something known as "induced demand, in which creating a greater supply of something just makes people want to use it more. And more traffic brings more pollution," as Politico added.

That's just a fancy excuse by planners who don't like road and freeway construction and have basically given up on new highway construction. New roads do encourage people to use them — but it's really about “pent up demand.” The nation's infrastructure building hasn't kept pace with population growth, so of course new roadways quickly become crowded.

If this is the goal, the administration ought to admit as much and not sell us a bill of goods about fixing the nation's congestion problems. Other line items tell a similar story. Although the bill directs \$110 billion to new road construction, Fortune magazine reports that it also spends \$73 billion to move away from fossil fuels, \$66 billion for Amtrak, \$50 billion to make our infrastructure more resilient to climate change and, well, you get the idea.

Obviously, flaws and all, the bloated package has momentum. After all, neither party cares about fiscal responsibility and with a national debt topping \$28 trillion, what's another \$550 billion? But let's at least not pretend this bill will do much to upgrade the nation's infrastructure.