

Transportation needs largely ignored in presidential race

By JOAN LOWY

Here are a few items that largely were missing from the presidential campaign: planes, trains, roads and bridges.

But as Superstorm Sandy reminded the world so vividly, we can't afford to do without them. So why isn't the nation's transportation infrastructure a hot topic?

Money, for one. Neither President Barack Obama nor Mitt Romney suggested he has a good idea for how to pay for what needs to be done.

Most of the transportation network was built in the last century; in some places, it dates to the 1800s. Aging highways, bridges, trains and buses are frequently in need of repair or replacement and no longer can handle peak traffic demands. More than 140,000 bridges are structurally deficient or obsolete. The problem will only get worse as the U.S. population grows.

The aviation system is struggling, too. A long-delayed program to modernize air traffic control and use satellite technology is projected to cost tens of billions of dollars. The current system is based on World War II-era radar technology. The number of airline passengers is forecast to rise from the current 730 million annually to 1.2 billion in 2032, and the old system won't be able to keep up.

The tab to keep the surface transportation system running is even greater. A congressional commission estimated that all levels of government are spending \$138 billion a year less than is needed to maintain the current system and make modest improvements.

Gas tax revenue that pays for federal transportation aid to states is declining because people are driving less and cars are more fuel-efficient. Inflation also has taken a toll. The federal tax of 18.4 cents a gallon hasn't been increased since 1993, and the federal Highway Trust Fund is projected to go broke in 2014.

"Obama mentions roads and bridges every once in a while, which I suppose is better than not mentioning it, but no one is really having any significant policy discussion about it or how it fits into our national debate over the debt," said Joshua Schank, president of the Eno Center for Transportation, a think tank.

During his first months in office, Obama

persuaded Congress to pass an economic recovery bill that included \$48 billion in highway and transit aid beyond normal federal spending, including \$8 billion to jumpstart a national high-speed rail program. But when House Democrats drafted a long-term transportation plan, the administration quietly asked them to shelve that proposal. Obama's focus was on health care, and there was no extra money to go around, Democrats were told. The White House also was unwilling to spend political capital trying to raise the gas tax to pay for transportation improvements, knowing Republicans would label the president a tax raiser.

The 2010 elections swept into the House dozens of Tea Party Republicans determined to shrink the government, making it even less likely that Congress would agree to spend hundreds of billions of dollars on a long-term transportation plan.

Obama proposed a six-year, \$476 billion transportation program this year; Congress ignored it. Administration officials said the program would be paid for through the "peace dividend" created by bringing troops home from Afghanistan and Iraq. But the wars were largely financed by borrowing, and phasing them out doesn't create a new pool of ready cash.

Facing the prospect that the trust fund would run out of money and that highway aid would be cut off, Congress passed a two-year plan in June that uses money from increases in employers' pension insurance premiums and pension accounting changes to keep transportation programs going at current levels, plus increases for some programs to account for inflation, through the 2014 budget year. After that, the fund is once again forecast to go broke.

Historically, transportation has been one of the few issues to span the ideological divide between Democrats and Republicans. But that bipartisan consensus has evaporated in recent years.

"There have always been differences in emphasis," said Rob Atkinson, who headed the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission, set up by Congress. "But now we have starkly different visions of the federal role in surface transportation policy that we haven't had since the interstate highway system was built."

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