

COMMENTARY

Editorials, letters, columns and other opinions

Solving Infrastructure Problems Takes Civic Vision



COMMENTARY

Gary London

A recent report published by the Urban Land Institute, "Infrastructure 2010: Investment Imperative," argues that the U.S. is fundamentally deficient in both the amount, and state of, infrastructure, including roads,

rail, energy, water and sewer systems.

The problem is reminiscent of another infrastructural shortage some 80 years ago. President Roosevelt attacked that problem by creating agencies to fund and employ people to build things: Many of San Diego's classic buildings — including the downtown library, the County Administration Center at 1600 Pacific Highway, not to mention the area's bridges and dams — were built during the frenetic period of the Great Depression, both as a response to the deficiencies of that era and as a way to put people to work.

Taking a page from that playbook, the ULI has issued a "call to arms" for our nation to pay attention to the decline of our infrastructure.

They call for a "National Vision" for infrastructure improvement, a vision which includes identifying resources and prioritizing programs to repair and modernize outmoded systems. They suggest that the need to allocate resources and prioritize these programs will define the quality of our economic future for the next 100 years. They explicitly state that America's ability to remain competitive globally depends on this investment.

Indeed, this is a theme that has recently been part of a vigorous debate among thinkers and analysts who are focused on America's future and our urban landscape.

Richard Florida recently published "The Great Reset" in which he estimates that the need to invest in high-speed, fixed-rail systems to connect mega-regions such as Chicago to New York City, New York City to Washington, D.C., or Southern California to San Francisco, would range from \$140 billion to \$500 billion.

The federal government spent \$429 billion (in 2009 dollars) to build the U.S. highway system in the 1950s and '60s. The completion of that system completely changed our lives by fostering mobility in automobiles both within and between cities.

High-speed rail is a solution, he suggests, that will resurrect the declining regions of the Midwest and rust belt by linking them with the economic power centers of the East Coast.

Not too far removed from this concept, although coming at it from a far different perspective, is Joel Kotkin, in his recent book, "The Next Hundred Million."

Kotkin suggests that our nation is inevitably going to add 100 million people through the combination of natural growth and immigration between now and the year 2050.

He sees a future as one of re-populating our rust belts and prairie states, because they are cheaper, flatter, more

welcoming and consistent with the manufacturing boom that he foresees for America.

While Florida ultimately argues that the future of America lies in its ability to live in densely populated environments, which would reduce land-use waste and auto dependency, Kotkin argues that America's future ought to be a continuation of the suburbanizing trends which played out in the 20th century.

Rather than agreeing with urbanists such as Florida, Kotkin embraces the high quality of life concept that has fueled suburban growth for decades and suggests that Americans are not going to wean themselves from that lifestyle.

Growing Footloose Companies

Kotkin and Florida are at different ends of the land-use futures spectrum.

I have come to the conclusion that the answer to our economic and urban ills falls somewhere in between. I mean that literally and figuratively. Literally, America is going to grow. And because it is expensive to grow exclusively on the coasts, we will very likely grow "in between."

Most high-technology companies are "footloose": They can expand anywhere, unlike the 19th and 20th century manufacturers who were tied to certain geographic regions. Localities bid for their services by providing economic incentives, a reliable work force base and a willingness to approve the development of their facilities in a high quality-of-life environment.

They can and will go to places that were literally passed over in America's last 50 years of the 20th century, when 70 percent of our nation's growth migrated to the "Sunbelt," principally Arizona, California, Florida and Texas.

I am betting along with Kotkin, Florida and the ULI that our nation's economic future is bright. While we all have a different "take" on how all of this will play out, just below the surface of these philosophical debates there is agreement.

Engage in a Mature Debate

Therefore, the only real argument is how we prepare for this growth.

Coastal California cities, including San Diego, are simply not engaged in a mature debate about our economic future and our growth. Some of this is understandable since we are mired in the current mess of limited fiscal resources and how to deal with it.

These are the great issues of our times and they are thematically playing out in every political race now under way, from governor to city council seats.

There is very little room to argue about long-term basic infrastructure needs when we have pension deficits, prospective tax increases, cuts in services and neglected parks, libraries, schools and safety services to work out.

It's really a matter of how we balance the short-term problems with long-term needs and solutions. Let me suggest a better framework for this debate:

Recognize change: For instance, we are not going to continue to grow our manufacturing sector in San Diego. San Diego is too expensive, has too little

available land, housing costs will remain too high and transportation problems are too ominous for most manufacturers to sustain and grow here. However, we will benefit from the rise of the professional, knowledge-based, idea-driven sectors, an urban future rooted in technology, entrepreneurship, tourism and the economic multipliers from a large military presence.

Act creatively: We must revitalize our aging transportation, water, waste and energy infrastructures by reaching out for new solutions. This will require a new focus on revitalizing existing communities in unconventional ways.

Think forward, not backward: Looking to 19th and 20th century solutions for these infrastructure upgrades, including their financing and implementation, is backwards. Prepare and build on our strengths and shed the past.

For instance, building an expensive expansion of fixed-rail transit — be it an expansion of the trolley or a coastal high-speed system — should be subject to two simple tests: Will people ride them, and, are there other quicker, cheaper solutions?

New Framework for Finding Solutions

While we are currently mired in water problems, there is actually plenty of water. We have inched towards economic parity between shipping water here from elsewhere, and recapturing it from the ocean, or recycling it from waste. The current focus on conservation must be expanded to more expeditiously take us to these new water futures.

While our school districts are cutting costs, the result of which might jeopardize our future by under-educating our children, why not distribute an iPad to every student to dent the ever-increasing student-teacher ratio? This is not a joke. We know that employing technology to educate our children might reduce teacher requirements. This has to be the cheapest, quickest way to solve our education problem.

And there is an energy solution which can be implemented home by home, business by business, in deploying small systems — be they solar, wind or energy management based.

The answers are out there. I am proposing that we start attacking these infrastructural problems by starting with a new framework.

I am also suggesting that we stop being intimidated by the present so we can look to the future. I know that is a hard thing to do given the harsh realities of our economic times.

There is simply too much institutionalized inertia, including the paucity of political leadership and dominant vested interests.

But America has extricated itself out of these messes before, and we can and have the responsibility to do so again. Locally, we can start by creating a new civic vision.

Gary H. London is president of The London Group Realty Advisors, which provides real estate consulting and economic analysis. Check him out on the Web at londongroup.com.

SAN DIEGO BUSINESS JOURNAL

4909 Murphy Canyon Road, Suite 200
San Diego, CA 92123
858-277-6359 • Fax 858-277-6398
E-mail: sdbj@sdbj.com • Web site: www.sdbj.com

PRESIDENT & PUBLISHER

Armon Mills amills@sdbj.com • 858-277-6795

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Scott Whitley swhitley@sdbj.com • 855-277-0722

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Reo Carr rcarr@sdbj.com • 858-277-1740

EDITORIAL

Managing Editor

Brad Sondak bsondak@sdbj.com • 858-634-4634

Asst. Managing Editor

Julie Gallant jgallant@sdbj.com • 858-634-4626

Contributing Editor

Tom York tyork@sdbj.com

Senior Reporter

Mike Allen mallen@sdbj.com • 858-277-6971

Reporters

Heather Chambers hchambers@sdbj.com • 858-277-6897

Brad Graves bradg@sdbj.com • 858-277-6586

Lou Hirsh lhirsch@sdbj.com • 858-277-8904

Kudos/Giving Columnist

Joyce Glazer jglazer@sdbj.com

Editorial Assistant

Kristen Nevarez knevarez@sdbj.com • ext. 3109

Photographers

Melissa Jacobs • mj@sandiegophoto.com

Stephen Whalen • peak15@roadrunner.com

RESEARCH

Research Director

Kevin Black kblack@sdbj.com • 858-634-4636

Research Assistant

Andrew Schweizer aschweizer@sdbj.com • ext. 3112

ADVERTISING

Sales Manager

Dale Ganzow dganzow@sdbj.com • 858-277-4832

Account Executives

Cindy Dunford cdunford@sdbj.com • 858-277-6692

Lisa Elrod lelrod@sdbj.com • 858-634-4234

Jim LaMarca jamarca@sdbj.com • ext. 3150

Classified Account Executive

Mallory Bullard mbullard@sdbj.com • 858-277-6594

Sales Administrator

Kathi McArthur kmcarthur@sdbj.com • 858-634-4631

Events Coordinator/Supplements Editor

Carole Ravago cravago@sdbj.com • 858-634-4634

Events Specialist

April West awest@sdbj.com • 858-277-6695

ART DEPARTMENT

Director of Production

Michael S. Domine mdomine@sdbj.com • 858-634-4628

Design Editor/Graphics Artist

Darlene Allain-Horn dallain-horn@sdbj.com • 858-277-1516

CIRCULATION

Director of Circulation & Marketing

Linda Olander lolander@sdbj.com • 858-277-2914

Director of Circulation Sales

Lawanda Ashworth lashworth@sdbj.com • 858-277-9764

Circulation & Marketing Associate

Casimira Lavala-Martinez clavala@sdbj.com • ext. 3142

ADMINISTRATION

Controller

Mark J. Misiano mmisiano@sdbj.com • 858-277-6692

Receptionist

Dorothy Blanchard dblanchard@sdbj.com • ext. 3101

