Cliff Slater's SECOND OPINION
Posted on: Thursday, June 15, 2006

Transit policy veers away from rail ideas

U.S. Transportation Secretary Mineta announced last week a new national transportation policy, the *National Strategy to Reduce Congestion*[i] that will have a profound affect on how we approach transportation planning in the future.

He declared, "Congestion is not a fact of life. It is not a scientific mystery, nor is it an uncontrollable force. Congestion results from poor policy choices and a failure to separate solutions that are effective from those that are not."

While the Secretary is downplaying the change as affecting rail transit, bear in mind that rail transit is highly political and so one should not read too much into denial.

However, one can infer a great deal by parsing the various announcements. First,

- First, there is no mention of rail transit anywhere whereas bus/rapid transit is.
- Second, the new policy document has a table showing those cities with the highest costs in both traffic congestion and wasted fuel, and the ten worst all have rail transit. That may be another indicator.
- Third, this new federal policy smells like a radical departure from earlier ones in that it is highway oriented and for solutions looks to new highways, congestion pricing, HOT lanes, buses and private sector financing in the form of public private partnerships (PPPs).

One can only conclude that we are seeing a radical change in the making. And since no one has shown that rail transit reduces traffic congestion anywhere, it is a welcome one.

Two forces have worked to bring private highway financing to the fore. First, our current highway funding comes largely from federal, state, and city gasoline taxes. But the miles we can now drive per gallon of gas has increased 40 percent over the last 30 years and so taxes have not kept up with highway wear and tear.[ii]

Second, as we have added highways, we have also added maintenance costs. While highway construction has slowed considerably, the freeway system begun in the 1950s is ageing and incurring ever-greater maintenance costs.

Between these two factors, it now takes most of the highway funds available just to keep existing highways both maintained and enhanced to keep them up to current standards.

Funding for highways, allowing for inflation, is currently declining.[iii] Maintenance costs are rising steadily while capital outlays have flattened. In short, the traditional highway funding mechanism is in crisis.

Accordingly, any significant increase in highway facilities requires either increasing taxes or a relying on private funding.

Tollways are a good solution to this problem: Just as we do not need all the highway space we have for 4:00 AM travel, so we also do not need enough tollway space to accommodate everyone. Rather, the space we need is that sufficient to accommodate those who have a need for fast, reliable travel at particular times. For example, for those running late to job interviews, being late to pick up a child from day care, or late for a critical meeting, an optional uncongested way to travel is cheap at almost any price.

Tollways can satisfy this need, especially those where the price is changed continuously to balance demand, such as San Diego's I-15 HOT lanes. Drivers paying to use the HOT lanes both pay for the construction and maintenance of the new HOT lanes and, by so doing, reduce congestion on existing adjacent freeways. Everybody wins.

Secretary Mineta says that the new plan, "provides a blueprint for federal, state and local officials to follow as we work together to tackle this growing problem. Over the coming months, we will focus the Department's resources, funding, staff and technology to cut traffic jams … We must not be afraid to embrace new solutions if we are going to make any meaningful progress in reducing congestion."

The new plan is worth reading (www.honolulutraffic.com/min.pdf). It spells out the enormous costs that businesses incur because of traffic congestion, costs that businesses have to pass on to consumers. It deals with the effects on families. And it tells of the American public becoming increasingly frustrated as congestion continues to get worse.

He says, "We justifiably do not accept equivalently low service levels from our other network and public utility services, and there is no reason to accept it in our transportation system."

How will this new policy affect Honolulu?

Let us take into account that rail transit is not mentioned in the plan, but pricing appears five different times and has a headline about, "The demonstrated success of road pricing."

The only reference to public transportation is, "Creating or expanding express bus services, which will benefit from free flow traffic conditions." Since these conditions in congested cities only occur where road pricing is in place, it can only have one meaning — HOT lanes.

And where does this leave rail transit? If this new policy is consistent in its declaration of war on traffic congestion, then this is a turnabout by the U.S. Department of Transportation. It will leave a Honolulu rail line out in the cold unless Parsons Brinckerhoff can show that it will reduce traffic congestion more than HOT lanes. That is impossible.

Cliff Slater is a regular columnist whose footnoted columns are at www.lava.net/cslater

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Footnotes:

[i] http://isddc.dot.gov/OLPFiles/OST/012988.pdf

[ii] Passenger vehicle fuel consumption up only 23 percent in 15 years. See http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/06statab/trans.pdf Table 1085. VMT up 50 percent in the last 15 years. Table 1084.

[iii] http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/06statab/trans.pdf Table 1073.