

Entitlements: Social and Transportation

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In this supercharged political season, what passes for discourse is often limited to one-line zingers that evidence little depth or breadth of understanding on the part of those who serve them up. Social programs are almost always targets, but the pejorative entitlements could just as easily be applied to public policy in the area of transportation.

Let us stipulate that we agree that social welfare programs are going to have to be critically examined and restructured, along with everything else in the federal budget, including the full range of discretionary items, such as nation-building and foreign aid. However, it would surprise many to know that much of our federal transportation funding is not in the discretionary area of the budget; that the various "trust funds" are tantamount to entitlements. This is almost never mentioned, and the financial insolvency of some of our transportation programs may be more imminent than is Medicare, etc.

One of the largest transportation entitlement programs is the federal highway system. When did it become an inalienable right to drive an automobile or truck anywhere, anytime, without constraint caused by congestion, all without paying the full cost of constructing and maintaining the roads used? Recently, the Federal Highway Administration granted the Commonwealth of Virginia tentative approval, subject to further study and evaluation, to begin collecting tolls on I-95. Immediately, some of the highway users, those most notoriously underpaying at present, registered public protest. You would have thought we were hearing from a group of welfare recipients!

We regularly observe the seasonal parade of million-dollar yachts, southward this time of year, and northward in the spring, as they pass through the Chesapeake & Albemarle Canal. Does anyone believe the wealthy owners pay full cost for such transit by their hired crews? Some of those same yacht owners are regularly transported to and from Florida on private jets, another good target for deficit reduction hawks.

No question about it, things must change if we are to reign in runaway federal spending. The most expedient way to do it would be to share and share alike in proportionate cut-backs, while requiring users to pay more in fees for transportation benefits they receive. That may be an impossible dream given the flawed nature of humankind and the way Washington politics work, but it is the direction we must head. Instead, we continue to see partisan machinations to protect sacred cows, e.g. more new highway plans with subsidized parking garages, but less for "socialistic" rail and transit.

A great first step would be a unified transportation bill requiring evaluation of all transportation spending programs on a consistent basis; then prioritize them based on cost vs. benefit -- fully allocated -- taking into consideration health, safety, security, economic competitiveness, energy, and environmental considerations. There is no consistency now; instead, we have separate surface, air, and water "entitlement" legislation. Why not strive for unified federal transportation policy driven by merit, not by "K" St.?
