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Lester P. Lamm
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UNDERSTANDING TRANSPORTATION IN THE COMMONWEALTH—HOW DECISIONS OF THE PAST AFFECT US TODAY

National Overview

I always enjoy coming to Kentucky. In fact, the first time I came to this state was in 1961. Everyone who was around and had a driver’s license in 1961 can see tremendous changes in Kentucky’s highway system in that 30-plus year period. That is the subject of the discussion today (not only my discussion but the other panelists), to look around and see what’s been happening and how we can learn from what’s gone on in the past.

We also are looking ahead to see how we can make transportation in the Commonwealth somewhat better by our own actions than it might be accidentally. All of us have some ideas, and ideas are put into action when people get together and coordinate those ideas and agree to work together to carry them out.

Transportation is really the lifeblood of any community. You can see it in a relatively young country such as the United States and a relatively young state such as Kentucky. Transportation underlies everything that we’ve done because this state and this country wouldn’t even have been developed unless and until transportation technology and knowledge
permitted that development. As we know, most of the residents in our country came from elsewhere. They couldn’t have come unless there was a way to get them here from their previous residence.

It’s the same way in Kentucky, the country developed along the eastern seaboard and, as soon as transportation permitted, people started straggling through the gaps and around the valleys into the interior of the country. Then, when transportation improved, more people moved, and businesses came with them, and so forth. That’s the underlying principle by which civilization moves from one part of the world and encompasses another.

As a result of having all this mobility in our lifetime and the three preceding generations, this entire country and this entire state have been developed. We probably have seen more influence from transportation in that short four-generation time span than many other parts of the world that have been highly developed during that time.

The one thing that best characterizes the United States’ population and makes it distinct from other areas around the world is that we have the most mobile society the world has ever known. We have access to 825 motor vehicles per 1,000 Americans. No one else has ever approached that figure. Most of the highly developed countries of Europe are working at a level of roughly 500 vehicles per 1,000 population. Some of the really developing sectors of the world, such as some of the other southern continents and some of the former Soviet bloc countries in Eastern Europe, have vehicle ownership figures in the range of 100 to 150 per 1,000 citizens, which is what we had in 1930. We have grown accustomed to picking up in the morning or picking up at the end of the week or picking up at the end of one job and moving somewhere else to get our daily activity done more than any other group of people in the world. And, in fact, every decision we make, when you come right down to it, is governed by how, when, and how costly it would be to get from one place to another—decisions on where we live, where we work, where we locate our business, where we go to relax at the end of the workday, and so forth.

In looking back, I’d like to develop a theme about how some of these decisions that we’ve made here in Kentucky have been guided and perhaps enhanced by decisions that have collectively been made at the national level. Then I’ll take the most recent national decision, which is the 1991 surface transportation legislation (a real watershed piece of legislation), and turn the clock ahead and start looking into the future to see what additional benefits you, in Kentucky, might legitimately expect to get from that ISTEA legislation.

By the way, I had a chance to look briefly at your Transpo exhibition on 200 years of transportation in Kentucky and it really is very effective. As we approached the national bicentennial in 1976, the Federal Highway
Administration did the same thing. Perhaps some of you have had a chance to see the white, hardbound, very thick volume of 200 years of highway transportation in the United States. I keep a copy on my table at work and it's still a very valuable reference piece, and yours will be too. It's exciting to go back and look through these pages and see where we were and how far we've come today. I think it's worthwhile, even more than fun, to look back. It's illuminating and educational because too frequently those of us who have grown up in this motor-vehicle era take things for granted. We just expect that there will always be the motor vehicle, and that there will always be the highway system, and that we will always have a way to get from where we are to where we want to be in the right time and at a price we can afford. Yet, looking ahead from where we are now, that isn't necessarily going to be true automatically.

Looking back a hundred years, the federal government began once more to get involved in surface transportation. They had done so off and on in the first hundred years, as your history calendar points out. But, in 1893, they began a federal organization that was attached to the Agriculture Department, which is now the Federal Highway Administration. FHWA will complete its hundredth year in 1993.

Interestingly, the first point of focus for that original agency was technology transfer. They developed the practice of creating a system of “Good Roads trains” to demonstrate how to build an all-weather road that will take water off the roadway, to permit wagons, and later motor vehicles, to travel year around. They carried those trains all over the country, including a number of stops in Kentucky, in these early years.

Interestingly, technology transfer is still one of FHWA's major activities and one of their prime points of focus as they look ahead to the twenty-first century. Obviously, it's what has led to the creation of the Transportation Center here at the University.

Looking back to 1916, the Federal-Aid Highway Program began as another level of national decision. Congress decided in 1916 that some of the states would need a little financial assistance in carrying out their very ambitious roadway development plans in the opening decades of the motor-vehicle era. That program, the Federal-Aid Highway Program, struck a responsive chord and it continues today. We've grown to know and to count on that program to help states like Kentucky develop their own future highway activities.

While I was with FHWA, I did a lot of research on these early years (from 1916 through the early 1920s) and found that the program really got off the ground very quickly in the rural states (such as the entire Appalachian belt), where people had been floundering, for the most part, without adequate ability to finance major road investments. They were feeling that the rest of the country was leaving them far behind.
Looking back to a much more recent period of history, many things changed after 1956, with the era of development of the Interstate Highway System and the trust fund that financed the development of that highway system. It was developed on a pay-as-you-go basis, never achieving any kind of debt at the national level. It was paid for by the people who use and benefit from the system itself.

Those of you who have a few years of driving experience (I've had my driver's license since 1950) can think back to a time when there wasn't an interstate system in place. Perhaps some of you tried, as I did in the early 1950s, to drive from coast to coast. I drove from Boston to San Francisco before there was anything more than a five-mile stretch here and there of interstate system open to traffic. Every time I travel 500 miles in one day on limited-access highways, I'm struck by the fact that things are so different in this generation than they were just 40 years ago. And, again, what happened in this state and around the rest of the country was dependent upon, and waited until, this national decision was put in place.

Again, referring to my first visits to Kentucky, I thought that Kentucky was several years behind some of the Eastern Seaboard states that had put freeways in place before the Interstate System. But, you have surely caught up in these 30 years. I would hesitate to think about how viable the economic livelihood in the Commonwealth would be without the Interstate System. For instance, Jim Wiseman may talk about Toyota's reasons for deciding to locate here, and I'll bet they would have come up with something different if there wasn't an interstate highway system.

Looking back to the very recent past, let's bring ourselves up-to-date on the ISTEA legislation—the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991—signed into law by the President less than a year ago. We're approaching the end of the first year's activity, and the federal fiscal year closes in just a couple of days. So, we're in a position to see what's been happening so far. As this massive legislation has gotten underway, we can identify some ways the ISTEA legislation can really be a long-term benefit.

I believe Kentucky can really profit from having the ISTEA legislation. But, I want to leave you with the message that none of these nine potential benefits I'm going to discuss is going to happen automatically. They all require some additional work and, in fact, they all require people in many organizations with many voices speaking with one concerted message. That's when our elected leaders and the media (who govern public opinion) begin to listen and we begin to be able to get things done.

I don't want to encroach on tomorrow's panel session so I won't go into detail about the principles of the ISTEA legislation. But, just to set the stage, I'll give some background. As almost everyone recognizes by now,
it's a massive piece of legislation with many, many changes in how we've historically done business with the highway, the transit, the highway safety program. It's a six-year bill with $155 billion created, and complex to the point that the FHWA hasn't even scratched the surface yet in getting out the final regulations implementing the many changes.

I want to point out, though, one thing that FHWA and the entire Department (Federal Transit Administration included) have done very well is to permit states to move ahead rapidly using the old ground rules, or some rules modified on an ad-hoc basis. Thus, for the most part, people have not been sitting back waiting for the final regulations before they can act. You can point out, as I'm sure others will during this program, that Kentucky has had a very effective first year in the program.

The first feature of note is in connection with the Interstate System. The ISTEA legislation authorizes enough funds to close the final remaining gaps on the interstate, and then provides a $17-billion program over the next six years to upgrade or to rehabilitate or provide heavy maintenance for deteriorating segments of the old system.

One feature that I worry about is that, in effect, there are penalties built in if a state chooses to use these funds to upgrade any element of the older portions of the Interstate System. These are either fiscal penalties or, in some cases, they are direct prohibitions.

When you do that, you say that we're going to penalize people and make them drive in the year 1996, or in the year 2000, or into the next century, on the road system that exists today. We're going to put in enough money to make sure that we have another round of paving every several years and we're going to have the signs upgraded when the old signs wear out, and so forth.

But what happens when new economic development warrants a new interchange or a new pair of lanes or even a new highway? Looking at what you'd like to have in the future, how can you use the interstate features of the ISTEA legislation to get some real development going on Interstate 66? That is a real concern and one that you ought to worry about and work on with the congressional delegation to see what you can do to upgrade the older portions of the Interstate System to be able to remodel the system as economic conditions warrant.

The second feature is the National Highway System. To me, this is the key element in the ISTEA legislation. Four percent of the road miles will carry 40 percent of all vehicle travel around the country and 75 percent of all commercial vehicle travel. Consequently, this has to be the top national priority, the top federal DOT, and FHWA priority in the years to come.
The problems I have with the NHS provisions are whether there's enough money available and whether a four-percent system is extensive enough.

Looking at the benefits you in Kentucky would like to get from this system, you'd like to be able to use the National Highway System to upgrade the major arterial routes that carry traffic into the Interstate System. And, looking at your specific needs, wouldn't it be wonderful if there were enough money coming to Kentucky through the National Highway System apportionment to permit the eventual completion of the Appalachian System?

The Appalachian routes that have been developed are so tremendous in opening up economic activity in parts of Kentucky that haven't seen any before. Wouldn't it be great if we could complete all those connections in time?

But, I worry about funding, and I also doubt that 170,000 miles nationally will be sufficient. As I read it, roughly 130,000 miles (or maybe more) of U.S.-numbered roads that are now eligible for federal-aid primary funds are going to be taken off that map. That's going to leave entire counties and entire portions of states that won't have any service on major roads that carry their own specific financing. Those roads will have to compete with funding that also might be needed by big cities or by rural farm-to-market roads, and so forth. I worry about the adequacy of the National Highway System both in terms of the miles and the dollars available to do the things that I think you, in Kentucky, would like to see done.

The third area is metropolitan mobility. Here we have an unsurpassed opportunity to do good within the large and the small and the intermediate urban areas through the surface transportation program. A load of money set up with unprecedented flexibilities so that state and local leaders can use it whatever way they want to improve transportation around their part of the state.

The issue I worry about here is whether or not we are ready to move on it. As I look at the approaching end of the first year of ISTEA legislation, the Surface Transportation Program is the slowest spending program FHWA has administered. And, in fact, as you get into the more populated regions of the country, you begin to see the program spending slower and slower as you go up the scale. The fastest spending portion of the surface transportation program is the state flexible program and the next fastest is the money that's earmarked for the rural areas. The next is the money that's earmarked for the medium-range cities, and the slowest spending portion of the surface transportation program is the big city money.
Perhaps there's an issue there, perhaps not. Maybe it's just a case of needing more time to get it off the ground. But again, this is a great opportunity to do good for the Commonwealth if you can really take advantage of that part of the program.

The fourth ISTEA area is rural areas, trying to give the farmer the opportunity to bring his wares to the marketplace and to correct the deficiency that's been happening for a long time. Counties and rural portions of the country haven't had any capital investment funds and old facilities are wearing out under heavy traffic that they weren't designed to handle. Some of the rail branch line abandonments have contributed to that. Again, in a state like Kentucky with vast regions of rural transportation needs, you ought to be able to use these funds and get tremendous good out of them. The question is, are we in a position to really do it?

The fifth area is the bridge program. With major rivers along your borders, obviously, the bridge program is very important to Kentucky. You should be interested in the fact that there's increased money in the bridge program, but you ought to be worried about the fact there may not be enough money for big bridges. The discretionary bridge fund in the ISTEA legislation was cut to roughly 20 percent of what it was prior to 1991. I think that's going to really handicap big bridges over time.

The sixth area is highway and traffic safety. Being a rural state where people tend to get into the high-speed categories, it has always been tough for Kentucky to match the national average fatality rate. You do very well—you've been hovering pretty close to the national average. What we'd like to see over the remainder of the decade of the 1990s is for today's fatality rate of 1.9 deaths per 100 million motor vehicle miles cut almost in half to 1.0 by the year 2000. I'd like to see the traffic and highway safety program portions of the ISTEA legislation contribute to Kentucky's getting in that same roughly 50-percent reduction in the fatality rate over the same period of time.

The seventh area is research and development. Again, returning to the cooperative activity that the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet has with the University, there are great opportunities in the legislation. The great opportunities require people to be willing to get a larger-scale program moving.

I want to mention the Intelligent Vehicle Highway System part of the research area, in particular. This will be our opportunity to improve safety and efficiency on surface transportation into the twenty-first century. I can foresee technological developments that are happening in the vehicle manufacturer's research labs today that, within the next approximately 30 years at the outside, are almost going to make single-vehicle, run-off-the-road accidents a thing of the past.
Right now we have the technology to avoid, or to almost completely avoid, the collisions that take place between two vehicles. This calendar year, Greyhound has begun equipping all of its transcontinental buses with collision avoidance systems that work on the same principle that every commercial aircraft has. I look for the commercial vehicle fleet to get into this activity very effectively and then to have it penetrate into the passenger vehicle market as well.

By the time we reach the end of this decade, we may have motor vehicles that have unprecedented safety. It is not even possible to dream today of how safe these vehicles can be. We’ll be ready; the opportunity is there. Again, can we make the best use of the opportunity? In Kentucky, your effort on Advantage-I75 is going to be one of the major multi-state agreements to get IVHS principles adopted into real practice.

The eighth ISTEA opportunity is scenic roads. Tourism is one of the major employers in this state; sometimes it is number one, sometimes it’s number two, depending on the rest of the economy. This is the case in just about every state around the country as well. Eighty-five percent of American tourists get where they’re going on the highway system.

The scenic roads portion of the ISTEA legislation involves small dollar amounts but, to me, it is a great opportunity to really improve the quality of knowledge that the traveler has as to where the scenic features are on a road system in an unfamiliar state. I’d like to see that activity get off the ground.

Frankly, this was the slowest part of FHWA’s implementation of ISTEA in the first year. But, I think if we can get the scenic byways program moving, there are tremendous economic advantages to Kentucky.

The ninth area is the overall funding, the overall budget allowances that permit money to be spent in states like Kentucky. In my experience, Kentucky has always been a fast-spending state and, with very few exceptions, has always had projects ready to be pulled off the shelf. I don’t want to say always, but it has almost always been in the leading group of states as far as using federal-aid funds.

This year hasn’t been an exception, because at the end of the year you probably will have used $213 million or so. That is a very good year. Unfortunately, however, because the federal budget has been constrained throughout the 1980s and 1990s, even after having a great year, you’ll still have $55 million sitting in Frankfort not able to be used because of national budget constraints. That’s money you and I, the highway users of the country, have already paid into the highway trust fund. There are projects that could benefit the traveling public today if that money were made available. Let’s do what we can to try and get Congress to focus on
the fact that the surface transportation program has been underfinanced and really needs to get off the ground and use all of the funds available.

Again, Kentucky has really profited from national transportation decisions, particularly within the last 40 years. I don't expect the activities involving the 1991 legislation to be any different. You should be one of the leading states as far as your ability to profit from the ISTEA opportunities.

I'll say again, many things have changed, it is very definitely not business as usual, and nothing happens automatically. So, for any student, any interested party, any business person, any public citizen, any government agency that's interested in having the surface transportation program in the Commonwealth of Kentucky improved using ISTEA funds, here's your license, here's your opportunity, here's your challenge, here's your signal, your wake-up call. It's time to get something done. But, in order to get something done, we're all going to have to work together. Again, nothing happens automatically. There's not going to be a hand waiting in Washington with a bunch of dollars ready to hand out. You're going to have to come in with a way to use those funds productively to convince people that your program and your state needs them. I think we're on the threshold of another unprecedented round of tremendous transportation improvements. But again for us to really benefit, profit, from those transportation improvements that are potentially there now, we have to go out and scrap for it.