

Better use of stimulus funding

Bike-ped projects help with congestion, pollution, obesity says **Eric Van Steenburg**

How state and local governments spend their economic stimulus funds will determine what — in addition to significant debt — we pass on to our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

While transportation projects may seem a good use of those dollars, in many ways, new roads, highways and bridges will make our lives — and our children's — worse, not better. Here's how.

There are those who argue that new roads and highways reduce congestion, making it easier for people to get around. But reduced congestion also leads to more people wanting to drive. Ultimately, this leads to increased pollution and reduced air quality, a prognosis that the already over-polluted air in North Texas cannot withstand. Not to mention that the congestion cycle begins again.

How about trying something different?

State and local government officials should look skeptically at any project that increases the number of roads and highways in North Texas. Instead, they should focus on alternative transportation and mass transit options.

There are numerous shovel-ready projects in our area that focus on bicycle, pedestrian, complete streets and safe routes to school. And all of these projects are eligible for bridge and highway funds.

There is even a mandatory set-aside for transportation enhancement programs, of which bicycle and pedestrian projects are the best. Additionally, according to the nonprofit organization America Bikes, bicycle and pedestrian projects are eligible for a number of other grants.

In other words, there are plenty of opportunities to fund bike-ped projects.

The Rails to Trails Conservancy estimates that Texas will receive almost \$148 million in transportation enhancement funds. We must make sure that 100 percent is used so no dollars are returned to Washington or redistributed to other states. It makes no sense to turn down funding that could improve the lives of future generations.

Why do these types of projects merit funding? Here are five excellent reasons:

- Smaller transportation enhancement projects can move quickly to hire local businesses and help local economies.

- Bicycle and pedestrian projects are more labor-intensive and less material-intensive than highway projects, allowing them to create jobs at a better rate.

- Promoting active transportation increases a region's attraction, thereby supporting local businesses and improving the local economy. The Katy Trail, for example, has had a direct economic impact on all of its surrounding areas.

- Providing safe and convenient bicycle and pedestrian access provides more affordable transportation options, freeing up discretionary spending for other needs.

- Finally, implementation of these projects has a positive impact on the obesity epidemic.

Increasing road congestion by building more roads, highways and bridges is not the best use of our tax dollars. Instead, at the top of the list of stimulus funds should be numerous mass transit projects, particularly funding the proposed extension of commuter rail in half a dozen North Texas cities.

The choice is simple. Either we invest these funds in alternative transportation and mass transit projects that meet 21st century needs, or we continue down the same path of building more roads, highways and bridges. After all, it's only our children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren we're affecting.



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