No nation has attained or maintained greatness without a strong water infrastructure. Our nation has been fortunate over the last centuries to have had leaders who saw the necessity for this infrastructure and ensured that it was maintained and expanded to meet the changing conditions that faced a growing nation. But today, the water infrastructure of the United States is at risk. In recent times, our leaders have succumbed to the temptation to let attention to the business of infrastructure slip to the “let’s do it in the future” category, not only failing to maintain what we have, but ignoring future needs. If this continues, we risk creating crises that will equal recent challenges over fiscal stability and national security.

Our infrastructure provides water for agricultural, municipal, and industrial use, ensures safe disposal of our sewage, sustains a vital river and harbor transportation system, generates power, reduces the impact of frequent floods and droughts, and provides waters to nurture the natural and beneficial functions that exist within the floodplains of our rivers.

We now face the ominous challenges and exciting opportunities offered by accelerating changes to these systems. Our birthrate is among the highest of industrialized nations and our scattered and relatively uncontrolled development is stretching our infrastructure to the breaking point. And climate change is altering the nature, location, and frequency of droughts and floods, creating supply shortfalls where previously there were none, and placing populations at risk that heretofore were relatively safe.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) periodically produces a report card on the status of our nation’s infrastructure and continues to report that these grades are falling while the backlog of necessary maintenance and upgrades is increasing. ASCE (2005) estimates the total cost of infrastructure repairs and upgrades across all sectors now exceeds $1.6 trillion, with a substantial portion of that need tied to water infrastructure. Structures whose useful life was initially evaluated at 50 years have long since exceeded their life span. Every year we learn of more unsafe dams (3,500 at last count), gaps in the fiscal support of water treatment and water supply systems (now exceeding $20 billion annually), a crumbling inland waterway system, and serious deficiencies in the flood damage reduction infrastructure: levees, floodwalls, and other features whose conditions are unknown and whose potential failure threatens major cities across the nation.

There is clear need for leadership on these issues at the national and state levels. As a start, the Building America’s Future Coalition, recently established by California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell, and New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg, represents a welcome initiative to bring public attention and federal action to infrastructure. The coalition calls for a national vision and policy for infrastructure renewal, significantly greater resource investment based on merit and national priorities, and streamlined bureaucratic processes to get money where it’s needed.

Facing Fiscal Challenges

As you well appreciate, dealing with the infrastructure problem will require significant and continuous commitment of...
fiscal resources over an extended period. Funding will have to come in the form of loans, direct federal programs, grants, and new and innovative financing mechanisms. Federal/state/local cost sharing is a 21st-century reality that will require careful integration of the needs of the multiple sectors of the water environment. The recent passage of a $5 billion bond issue in California to support repair of levees, and Florida’s advancement of funds to support joint federal/state cost-shared work in the Florida Everglades highlight diminishing federal capabilities to fully support infrastructure activities and should compel you to consider the fiscal challenges that you face and the new relationships that are developing.

Investments in infrastructure need to be seen not only as fiscal demands but also as opportunities for America’s workforce.

In 2005, New York businessman Felix Rohatyn and former Senator Warren Rudman called for the creation of a national infrastructure corporation to “effectively finance infrastructure projects of substantial national or regional significance using public and private capital, including international capital.” More recently, citing the need to treat infrastructure renewal “as investments, not simply budget expenditures,” they argued that, “to compete in the global economy, improve our quality of life, and raise our standard of living, we must rebuild public infrastructure.” They also offered strong support for the National Infrastructure Bank Act introduced into Congress by senators Chris Dodd and Chuck Hagel. This bill, which died in the 110th Congress, would have financed infrastructure development based on a project selection and delivery process that would support national and regional priorities and isolate itself from Congressional earmarks.

The last decades also have seen private financing used to support infrastructure development in the transportation sector, most notably in the toll road business. Private support of water infrastructure development unfortunately has been embroiled in political debates over privatization of the resource rather than the efficient operation of supply and treatment systems. Some firms are currently examining the feasibility of private financing of flood-risk-reduction structures such as levees and flood walls, where revenue from taxes could support long-term repayment of initial private investments. It is time for you to more closely examine public-private partnerships.

The Path Forward: Where Do We Need to Go?

• You, along with state governments, must acknowledge we have a serious challenge that must be addressed. Investments in infrastructure need to be seen not only as fiscal demands but also as opportunities for America’s workforce.

• You must support a national assessment to determine the real extent of our water infrastructure problems and develop options to address them. Two 110th Congress bills (S. 2728 and H.R. 135) proposed creation of a commission to examine U.S. water needs. While such a commission would not deal with the entire problem, the concept is a step in the right direction.

• Both federal and state governments must develop innovative financing mechanisms. The National Infrastructure Bank Act is a realistic approach to dealing with financing. Although it will face difficulties in moving ahead because it is based on need, not earmarks, Congress must recognize the gravity of the situation and rise above individual members’ needs to support this nationally focused approach.

• The actions of the Administration and the Congress on water issues must be better coordinated. You must develop mechanisms to reduce the overlap and redundancy among programs and to integrate the efforts of federal agencies and congressional committees wherever possible.

A Congressional Water Infrastructure Caucus that was established in 2000 rapidly disappeared because little glory is given to those who take care of infrastructure business. President George W. Bush paid little attention to infrastructure. Now is the time for you to take a new approach and a renewed commitment to infrastructure. Such actions can only benefit the economy, our national security, and the well-being of all Americans.

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References


