

# Letters Letters Letters

**I thoroughly enjoyed your issue on infrastructure** [Winter 2009]. We have badly neglected infrastructure, and it shows. In fact, Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood said the other day that this country looks like one giant pothole, and he is right.

What seems to have been missed, even in what was otherwise an interesting and illuminating discussion of the critical need for a national infrastructure policy, is that the president's stimulus package is precisely that. Yes, some of it involves quick job-creating projects that will avoid layoffs and get us moving on "shovel ready" projects, but in its dramatic new emphasis on high-speed intercity rail and major investments in metropolitan transit systems, it has set the stage for what many of us hope will be a long-term commitment to both.

It is positively embarrassing to visit our friends in Europe and Asia, take advantage of dozens and dozens of first-rate urban transit systems, ride modern high-speed trains at speeds that will soon exceed 200 miles per hour, and then return to the US and its crumbling highways, poor or nonexistent transit systems, and trains that are still traveling at 1920s speeds outside of the Northeast Corridor.

There is no better time than now to get cracking on the president's plan for high-speed rail and modern public transit. Contractors are bidding low, and 20 percent of the building trades are out of work. The "Steel Interstate" awaits us. It is time we built it.

*Michael S. Dukakis*  
Brookline, Massachusetts

**"A Bridge to Somewhere"** [Winter 2009] is as powerful a conversation as it is rare. That's unfortunate. America's foundation is crumbling. The nation is in an unprecedented physical decline. Decades of neglect are eroding centuries of progress. Call it the Great Regression that's threatening the water we drink, the schools we send our children to, even the pursuits of our happiness. Maintenance is being put off to the point of criminality. Increasing traffic

and rising utility consumption are breaking down the nation's once-great public works.

America once set the highest standards with its longest rail lines, boldest bridges, and cleanest drinking water. Now, Asia and Europe threaten to eclipse us as they construct better educational facilities, greener power plants, and more effective public transportation networks. The US should have started rebuilding years ago. We have what it takes: wealth, natural resources, and brilliant minds with readied answers.

It's all connected. Like an unwanted chain reaction, the failure of one system causes the crash of others. When Minnesota's busiest highway bridge collapsed, it wiped out rail lines; blocked a lock for barges on the Mississippi River; made getting to the airport problematic; and fouled mass-transit routes. Incapacity on the nation's electrical grids drives upward the cost of running mass-transit systems — the biggest consumers of electrical power. The breakdown of New Orleans' levees destroyed the city's entire infrastructure: highways, locks, grid, mass-transit system.

Balance between rails and roads, coal and wind, and waste and reclamation are within our grasp. If rebuilding begins, we rise above the challenges. If not, the Great Regression continues and our futures and the environment are going to suffer.

*Dan McNichol*  
Author, *The Big Dig* and  
*The Roads That Built America*  
Boston

**While the gray infrastructure** of roads, bridges, and highways is important, the role of green infrastructure is equally significant in sustaining healthy communities. If, as Elizabeth Padjen says in her letter from the editor [Winter 2009], "the essential purpose of infrastructure is to support commerce and the public welfare" and that a national infrastructure policy "would embrace sustainability," then the purpose and policy must include green infrastructure as a central component.

Green infrastructure is a smart-growth concept that balances development with conservation by connecting environmental, social, and economic health issues. Green infrastructure advances smart conservation through large-scale thinking and a holistic approach to planning. It achieves a healthy and livable balance between development and conservation, highlighting the importance of the natural environment. Its application contributes to the health of ecosystems and human beings as components of the natural world. In many instances, it is the interconnected network of open spaces and natural areas, such as greenways, wetlands, parks, woodlands, and native plants. Those features can also manage stormwater, reduce flooding, improve water quality, clean the air, and provide areas for shelter, shade, and rest. These are life-sustaining functions.

A good example of Bay State green infrastructure on a large scale is the Quabbin Reservoir complex. While many communities around the nation rely on expensive filtration systems to treat the surface sources of their drinking water, 2.5 million Greater Bostonians rely on the 80,000-acre forested landscape of the Quabbin to filter their water. This green infrastructure is far less expensive and, more importantly, safer and more effective from a public-health perspective.

Inherent in keeping a city or town livable, green infrastructure is not simply an "amenity": it is a new and necessary way of undertaking community development.

*Jack Clarke*  
Director of Public Policy and  
Government Relations  
Mass Audubon  
Boston

**In "Transportation @ MIT"** [Winter 2009], James McCown writes that design decisions are now being based on how people actually travel. As Mayor Thomas Menino advances Boston Bikes, an initiative he started in September 2007 to turn Boston into a world-class biking city,

the intersection of transportation and architecture is as apparent as ever; through quality design, we can promote green transportation.

In just two-and-a-half years since its launch, Boston Bikes has been remarkably successful. Ridership has increased by 30 percent, which is more than double the growth nationally. We became the first city in the country to replace a car parking spot with a bike rack, which can be found on Massachusetts Avenue near Newbury Street. We've added 15 miles of bike lanes by working with transportation officials, and we've collaborated with many agencies to prepare for a watershed moment in 2010, when Boston will become the first major US city to offer a large-scale public bike-share program.

By investing in all aspects of making Boston — already one of the greenest cities in the country — a leading biking city, we stand at the forefront of addressing what McCown calls “the problem of moving around.”

*Nicole Freedman*  
Director of Bicycle Programs  
City of Boston

**I, too, miss the elevated Artery** lamented by Stephen Heuser in “Surface Road” [Winter 2009], and the fly-through of Boston it provided drivers. It still represents to me an earlier era of Boston, one of a grittier, noisier working city and harbor, one for which I hold great fondness. I disagree, though, that it held much value as a tangible piece of engineering within the city. Even through a utilitarian lens, the structure held little beauty, unlike the aqueducts and fountains of Rome and unlike other infrastructure projects of its generation. It crossed far beyond the boundary of romance that may be attributed to industrial structures, not to mention the noise levels and air quality that further diminished its attractiveness.

As the author noted, the subways below grade, though invisible, evoke excitement and attractiveness in people's imaginations, and I would argue the “Tip” (the Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. Tunnel) accomplishes the same thing in spades. Further, the demolition of the Artery superstructure has not reduced the presence of infrastructure in the city, but rather shifts the balance from

infrastructure for cars to infrastructure for pedestrians, in the form of beautiful streetscapes, parks, and views. It is not about denial of infrastructure, but rather an enhanced approach to infrastructure in the Information Age, one that places people and their environment as the priority. Just as people's joints and sinews invisibly (thankfully) propel them forward, I would posit that the best infrastructure supports elegant, convenient living while minimizing an adverse presence. The old Artery did not come close to achieving that mission.

*Gretchen Von Grossmann AIA, AICP, LEED AP*  
Von Grossmann & Company  
Boston

**The Infrastructure issue** [Winter 2009] is on point, but as usual, when our profession really gets going, we are capable of flying high and the details can get lost. My favorite cause for many years, rooftops, is among them. Is now the time for including this interface with the sun and rain in our infrastructure discussions?

This endless surface can collect energy (both solar and wind) and water at the point where it serves its inhabitants — an entire population. But we have to see it as an overall fabric woven of zoning, design assistance (as opposed to “review”), technology, tax incentives, stepped-up leverage with utilities, publicly financed (and encouraged) research, an adaptable industry, and architectural invention. And, appropriate use of rooftops needs to be publicly mandated or encouraged by incentive permitting.

There is nothing complicated or difficult about putting this infrastructure to work in an architecturally (no matter how one defines architecture) coherent context, other than to first get ourselves, and then everyone else, to see it as infrastructure.

*Joseph Eldredge FAIA*  
West Tisbury, Massachusetts

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