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Minnesota Appoints New Transportation Commissioner

Minn. Governor's Office Press Release – April 21, 2008

St. Paul, Minnesota – Gov. Tim Pawlenty appointed a new Commissioner for the Minnesota Department of Transportation this week. Tom Sorel, currently serving as head of the Federal Highway Administration division office in Minnesota, will begin his new role as Commissioner on Monday, April 28.

Mr. Sorel, 51, has held various positions with the FHWA since 1978, including Major Project Team Leader at agency headquarters in Washington, D.C. and Director of Planning and Program Development and Chief of Technology Services in Albany, New York. During the 2002 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City, Mr. Sorel was the USDOT liaison for federal transportation issues and led the effort to build infrastructure for the event.

In addition to many FHWA performance awards, he has received the Presidential Honor for leading the federal transportation response, recovery and rebuilding efforts in Minnesota in the aftermath of the I-35W Bridge Collapse. He currently serves on the boards of the Center for Transportation Studies at the University of Minnesota, Minnesota Guide Star and the Transportation Engineering and Road Research Alliance.

"With 30 years of transportation experience and a civil engineering background, Tom Sorel is the right person to lead Mn/DOT," Gov. Pawlenty said. "Minnesota has invested more in roads over the last five years than ever before. Tom Sorel will provide leadership as we continue to build a modern and efficient transportation system for Minnesota." Mr. Sorel will oversee approximately

4,400 employees at Mn/DOT and a \$441 million budget for 2008.



Tom is a fine man and will bring able leadership to Mn/DOT. As the Executive Director of UDOT I had the privilege of working with him on many substantive issues and sine then on equally important matters in Minnesota. Congratulations to Tom and best wishes. TW

Detroit Transit Plan Takes Shape

Free Press – April 22, 2008

Michigan - A proposal to construct a \$371-million two-rail rapid-transit system in Detroit got a boost this week after a study group recommended the project, along with 13 to 15 sheltered stations and 400 parking spaces at the State Fairgrounds. The Detroit Transit Options for Growth Study concluded an 18-month review about what corridor and mode of transit would best fit the city.

However, the road ahead for the project is not without major hurdles. Federal funding must be approved to cover 60% of the cost, and then the rest of the funding must be secured through state, city and private sources. Despite the funding questions, city officials remain optimistic about the project because the city is seeking federal aid for a project within city limits, unlike other failed proposals calling for regional systems crossing county and city lines.

The next move for the long-envisioned project will be to begin preliminary engineering for the design phase and submit the proposal to the Southeast Michigan Council of Governments' Traffic Improvement Program. The council will review the proposal and submit the plans to the Federal Transit Administration.



I was just reading some statistics on the transit New Starts program and was impressed by how many projects in the pipeline are looking for money and by the small fraction that will actually get something. That system is broken and needs major repair given the demand for transit capital to meet needs in communities across the nation. TW

House Speaker Supports Toll Road Bank

TheNewspaper.com, DC - Apr 21, 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C. - The Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives has joined both Democratic presidential nomination contenders in support of a plan to establish a National Infrastructure Bank that would provide financial aid for new toll roads and other major infrastructure projects using federal taxpayer funds.

"Rebuilding America is a national security issue," said Speaker Nancy Pelosi. "Ninety percent of our oil imports are used for transportation. With investments in public transportation, more efficient roadways, and a broadband backbone that removes commuters from roads, we can reduce our dependence on foreign oil and reduce its implications on our foreign policy."

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Barack Obama (D-Illinois) and Hillary Clinton (D-New York) have also pledged their legislative support for the proposed Bank which would administer direct subsidies and issue bonds with up to fifty year terms to promote toll roads, mass transit, toll bridges, public housing and wastewater treatment systems.

"The task we face is so large that it demands the involvement of every level of government and the private sector," Pelosi said. "User fees will continue to play a major role in financing many types of infrastructure. Reliance on tolls for transportation is likely to continue and expand; our challenge will be to ensure that tolls are equitable, that they reduce congestion for everyone, and the revenues are used to improve infrastructure, not siphoned off for other purposes."

Ontario Recommended for \$4 billion Transit Network

Progressive Rail Roping, WI - Apr 18, 2008

Ontario - Canada's transit and transportation committees in Ottawa, Ontario have received a staff recommendation for a new downtown rapid-transit network, including north-south and east-west light rail lines, a tunnel under the downtown core and nearly 40 miles of new bus-only transitway. The \$4 billion project, known as Option 4, would take around 25 years to build.

"Our staff, their consultants, the international peer review panel, have all found that it would be impossible to service our city to 2031 without a tunnel," said Alex Cullen, chair of the transit committee. He estimated that the downtown tunnel would cost roughly \$550 million, adding that it is key to any citywide plan.

Plans call for an electric light rail line running north and south along the route of the existing O-Train line, originally devised as a demonstration project running diesel trains. The proposed north-south route would follow the same alignment, except that it would extend to South Ottawa, a rapidly expanding suburb south of the airport. There would also be a spur serving the airport.

The transit plan will be debated by the full council next month. If approved, lobbying for money will begin. Both federal and provincial governments will be expected to contribute significantly to the project.

I-69 Contractor Agrees to Settle Fraud Claims

WTHR, IN - Apr 22, 2008

INDIANAPOLIS - A contractor awarded a project by the Indiana DOT to build the first section of the I-69 extension to Evansville has settled fraud claims alleging it hid faulty work by switching road core samples on a separate project. Gohmann Asphalt and Construction Inc. has agreed to pay \$8.2 million. in the settlement. Indiana received more than \$362,000 from the ruling.

This month, INDOT awarded the company a new \$25.23 million contract to construct a 1.77-mile section of highway between I-64 near Evansville and State Road 68. Environmentalists criticized

the contract, saying the state was cutting corners to save money on the overall cost of the 142-mile highway between Indianapolis and Evansville, which is projected to cost between \$1.73 billion and \$1.83 billion.

"When you try to do things on the cheap, you get cheap products and that's what's going to happen, I'm afraid," said Tom Tokarski, president of the Citizens for Appropriate Rural Roads, which opposes the I-69 project. "I see no reason for the state to reward a company that has defrauded them. Are there no other contractors out there?"

INDOT spokesman Andy Dietrick said the state plans to follow standard procedures to make sure the company has necessary finances, licenses and is bonded and insured. If any of those are found inadequate, he said INDOT can void the contract. Dietrick added as INDOT is confident that long as Gohmann follows the terms of the December settlement with federal prosecutors in Louisville, Ky., "that gives us the assurance that they're going to do the work according to our specifications on this project."

"We would not have awarded the contract if we didn't think they're going to do a good job," said Dietrick.

Highway Congestion Costs Washington \$624M in '06

Seattle Times – April 23, 2008

Washington - Congestion on Washington highways had an economic cost of \$624 million to the state in 2006. A report released this week by the state transportation department stated that 40 percent of the congestion was the result of too many cars on roads with insufficient capacity. Construction accounted for 10 percent and bad weather for 15 percent.

The Washington State Department of Transportation report also found the number of licensed drivers has risen 76 percent since 1980, and miles traveled on state highways rose by 110 percent. During that same period, however, lane miles of state highways grew by just 10 percent.

Georgia Bills Seek to Revamp Transportation Funding

Land Line Magazine – April 22, 2008

Georgia - Numerous efforts were made this year in the Georgia General Assembly to boost transportation funding, and several aimed to reduce the \$7.7 billion transportation funding deficit in the state. Most of the bills failed to make it through the state's Senate and House before the regular session concluded, but three bills made it through both chambers.

Gov. Sonny Perdue signed one bill to aid road and bridge work with the establishment of the state-run Georgia Infrastructure Bank. The new law will use state funds appropriated by the General Assembly, federal highway funding and other sources to fund the bank. The State Road and Tollway Authority will govern the bank, which will make low-interest loans to communities for transportation construction and improvements. The state's 2009 budget also includes a \$28

million for the bank.

A separate Senate resolution that cleared both chambers encourages the state department of transportation to develop a statewide transportation plan incorporating all possible methods to enhance the road and bridge system. The effort would include public-private partnerships, new roads, transit systems and high-occupancy toll lanes.

Another bill awaiting the governor's signature would require the Georgia Department of Transportation to establish and publish benchmarks and issue reports on projects exceeding \$10 million.

States take Hit with Bush Fuel Economy Rules

San Francisco Chronicle – April 23, 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C. – An announcement by the Bush Administration for proposed regulations to raise fuel economy standards for cars and trucks to 31.6 miles per gallon by 2015, which was first applauded by environmentalists, has now sparked a fierce debate over who will set the nation's first limits on greenhouse gases.

The so-called fine print in the 417-page "Notice of Proposed Rulemaking," is language by the U.S. Transportation Department saying that more stringent restrictions on tailpipe emissions supported by 17 states, including California, are "an obstacle to the accomplishment" of the new federal standards and are "expressly and impliedly preempted" by federal law.

California attorney General Jerry Brown called it a hidden assault on California's rules, and environmentalists said automakers would use the language for their legal challenges to two recent federal court rulings in that were in favor of the states.

The proposed rules, which were approved by Congress and signed by President Bush in December, was announced Tuesday by Transportation Secretary Mary Peters, who acknowledged that the preemption language was part of the document.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has adamantly defended its stand as the only government entity with authority to set fuel economy standards for vehicles. Department officials believe this year's law mandating an increase in fuel economy to 35 miles per gallon by 2020 bolstered the agency's power.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-San Francisco, highlighted the overall reaction to the document from California. "The administration is continuing to block climate change progress by asserting that California doesn't have the right to move forward with its own global warming regulations. This is completely unjustified."



This fight has been brewing for some time. States, frustrated by the lack of progress at the national level, are taking environmental matters into their own hands. It is clear that the country does not need 50 different environmental standards. The cost implications would be astronomical for numerous businesses. That said, if I were

to predict the future I would bet on the fact that the outcomes will look a lot like what the states are proposing. TW

New Plan for Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel Expansion

Daily Press, VA - Apr 23, 2008

RICHMOND – A Virginia lawmaker believes the private sector may be the answer to expanding the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel, something he says the government has failed to accomplish in a timely manner. In a letter to Transportation Secretary Pierce Homer, Del. Phil Hamilton, R-Newport News, outlined a plan to sign a 50-year agreement with a contractor to expand the bridge-tunnel to two lanes.

Hamilton suggested the contractor charge a \$2 toll and keep the revenue in exchange for maintaining the bridge-tunnel for the length of the contract. His plan also proposes tolls be charged on the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel to finance the widening of I-664 and other projects. The letter to Secretary Homer asks that the department issue a request for proposals.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine is likely going to call a special session to work on transportation funding, including a regional plan for Hampton Roads. However, Hamilton fears lawmakers will not approve a regional plan, a separate plan for northern Virginia, plus a statewide funding plan for road maintenance that Kaine is hoping for.

Hamilton and Del. Glenn Oder, R-Newport News, have already requested the state do a study on widening the Hampton Roads Bridge-Tunnel to two lanes, and Hamilton hopes that an interested private firm may perform the study as well.

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