



Highlights of a forum, [GAO-07-1210SP](#)

Why GAO Convened This Forum

The nation's economic vitality and the quality of life of its citizens depend significantly on the security, availability, and dependability of its transportation network. The nation's transportation network presents particularly complex policy challenges, because it encompasses many modes on systems owned, funded, and operated by both the public and the private sectors. As the August collapse of a bridge span in Minneapolis illustrated, policymakers currently face the challenge of maintaining the safety and condition of the transportation network—in a time of increasing fiscal constraint. Addressing these challenges requires a fundamental reexamination and transformation of the nation's transportation policies and programs.

This forum brought together government, academic, and transportation industry experts, along with GAO's own transportation specialists. The discussion addressed (1) the appropriate goals for the nation's transportation policy, (2) the role of the federal government in achieving transportation goals, (3) how transportation goals might be financed, and (4) next steps in transforming transportation policy for the 21st century. These highlights do not necessarily represent the views of any one participant or the organizations that these participants represent, including GAO.

www.gao.gov/cgi-bin/getrpt?GAO-07-1210SP.

To view the full product, including the scope and methodology, click on the link above. For more information, contact JayEtta Hecker at (202) 512-8984 or heckerj@gao.gov.

HIGHLIGHTS OF A FORUM

Transforming Transportation Policy for the 21st Century

What Participants Said

Participants said that the nation's transportation policy has lost focus and that the nation's overall transportation goals need to be better defined and linked to performance measures that evaluate what the respective policies and programs actually accomplish. They noted that as the federal share of total transportation spending continues to decline, it has become increasingly important that federal transportation policy goals and their link to local decision making and spending be well defined. Further, according to participants, measured outcomes, or performance results, should be used to drive federal transportation policy and funding decisions. Participants indicated that enhancing mobility and maintaining global competitiveness are the most important goals for the nation's transportation policy.

Participants said that the federal government's role should focus on the policy side of transportation—establishing policy, providing guidance for executing policy, and supporting local and regional investments that correspond with federal policy goals. Additionally, the federal government has an important role to play in the movement of goods because of the impact on the national and global economies. They noted ways that the federal government could encourage transportation decisions that are consistent with national transportation goals by, for example, developing and using incentives and strengthening the user-pay principle.

Participants generally agreed that there is a need to address transportation funding immediately, and no single mechanism will solve the existing and future funding crisis facing the nation's transportation system. Potential approaches identified by participants include levying new taxes, implementing tolls, and utilizing congestion pricing strategies. However, participants acknowledged potential drawbacks to several of the funding mechanisms that were identified, such as a lack of public support for tolling and equity concerns with certain pricing mechanisms.

There was broad consensus among participants on the need for a transformation of our current approach to transportation policy to better meet current and future mobility needs in a strategic, integrated, and sustainable manner. For a successful transformation, participants said it is necessary to develop a constituency that will push for and support change. Participants said that there is a need to educate and influence both political leaders and the broader public because transportation is not currently perceived as a significant national problem. The public and private sectors need to better understand the magnitude and consequences of these transportation challenges to be motivated to change the status quo. Additionally, participants stated that local transportation initiatives underway may offer lessons on how to build the consensus needed to address today's transportation challenges.