Waiting at the Docks

Teaching on themes discussed in recent weeks in this column, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and I co-wrote an opinion piece on the national significance of L.A.'s ports and the need to invest in our transportation system. The op-ed follows up on a key issue stressed during the Chamber's Access D.C. trip this month, where the Mayor joined more than 70 business leaders from the Chamber at the Capitol to advocate for L.A. with federal officials. Below is the piece as it ran in today’s Washington Times.

This past week, California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed legislation recently passed by the state legislature to place the largest infrastructure bond measure in state history -- $37 billion for transportation, housing, education and levees -- before the voters in November. This historic agreement has the strong support of the City of Los Angeles and its business leaders. Meanwhile, throughout the United States, other states are struggling with how to fund the transportation infrastructure that is so necessary to the future of the country.

One of the biggest effects of that gap is the economic cost of delays and logistical uncertainties in transporting goods, as congestion threatens to overwhelm the system. Our economic reality is changing to meet the distribution needs of imported goods, and our environmental reality is telling us to be mindful of the inherent relationship between environmental pollution and the movement of goods. There will be no greater pressure placed on our transportation system and environment than this massive inflow. As we survey the global context and local landscape, it is clear that our gateway cities, with Los Angeles a top example, face major challenges -- from homeland security to the movement of goods to public health to the environment.

The movement of goods has far-reaching effects on the lives of all Americans. Not only does it shape our markets, it also impacts the air we breathe, the jobs we create and the economic climate we foster. American retailers and manufacturers depend on the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach for 43 percent of all imported goods to the United States. Think of it as a river carrying more than $230 billion in products to every corner of every state, where retail jobs and markups and sales taxes add value to local economies.

To carry this load, there are ships of increasing size and number, needing more trains and trucks, arriving at our docks every day. The biggest container vessels can now carry up to 1.2 million 29-inch color televisions or 50 million mobile phones and are larger than an aircraft carrier.

The issue we face is daunting: We have no coherent national policy to deal with goods and freight movement. Nor do we have the available resources up front to infuse our seaports, airports, highways and rail lines with enough capital to be efficient and cost-effective for users in years ahead.

We must be creative and responsible in how we green, grow and compete in our increasingly global market place. And our success will be measured not only by our economic prosperity, but also in how our decisions and investments maintain the environmental integrity and public health of our communities.

This is not an exclusively urban or rural problem; this is a global issue affecting every sector of our market and every consumer in every community. Meanwhile, issues surrounding port and cargo security have, until now, been going unaddressed and adding to the uncertainty within the supply chain.

The Los Angeles gateway is a national asset, providing consumer goods to the entire country. Californians are stepping up to the plate to ensure the critical infrastructure necessary for competitive access to world markets, but we can’t do it alone.

A stronger partnership with the federal government is essential. What’s needed? From Congress: Pass the port security bill. From the Department of Transportation: Provide a national freight policy and partner with the states and cities on massive gateway and corridor construction projects. From the states: Share the financial burden of these projects of national significance, whose return on investment is spread throughout the country.

The challenges we face are immense. And they will not be remedied with simple solutions or quick fixes. Nor can they be addressed by one community alone.

A unified country needs a unified, flowing transportation system. Los Angeles and Long Beach have a gateway to every corner of every state. And we are stepping up as others are struggling to fund the transportation infrastructure that is so necessary to the future of the country.
Angels and California are ready to put our future on the line to raise our share of the cost, but this is a future that belongs to the whole country, and we can only achieve it together.

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