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Will Obama's grand jobs plan stop toll roads?

President-elect Obama is talking about creating millions of jobs making public buildings more efficient, funding 'infrastructure' and modernizing schools. Hopefully most of it will go on weatherstripping the doors and windows of government offices and fluorescent light bulbs in schools, because the promise of vast federal spending on roads will stop toll financing dead.

The news that billions of federal dollars are about to flow into the states will cause not only toll financing to be put on hold, but state plans for higher gas taxes as well.

Obama said in a talk Saturday: "We will create millions of jobs by making the single largest new investment in our national infrastructure since the creation of the federal highway system in the 1950s."

http://change.gov/newsroom/entry/the_key_parts_of_the_jobs_plan/

But what happened in the 1950s. If you believe AASHTO/ARTBA-supported boosters like their favorite author Dan McNicholl ("The Roads that Built America: the Incredible Story of the US Interstate System") then Americans were destined to be mired in gridlock absent the 1956 Federal Aid Highway Act and the US Government's funding of the interstate highway system.

In fact states were building and planning a mass of highways themselves - some with gasoline taxes, some with tolls, some with a mix.

Toll roads that were funded and under construction continued, but the immediate effect of the enactment of the Federal Aid Highway Act in 1956 was to halt further work on scores of new and planned toll projects around the country. For example, the Indiana Toll Road was originally called the Indiana East-West Toll Road because there were plans for lots of other Indiana Toll Roads, not just the one.



It was the same all over the country.

Here's what the official history of American highways says:

"Among the many and far-reaching effects of the 1956 (Federal Aid Highway) Act, none was felt more immediately than its impact on toll road construction. The modern toll road era ended abruptly. With the promise of adequate funding... justification for that method (toll financing) no longer existed." (p294 of "America's Highways 1776 - 1976, A History of the Federal-Aid Program" US Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, US Government Printing Office, no date imprinted but Foreword by federal highway administrator is dated 1976)

Toll financing is stronger now than in the immediate aftermath of the 1956 disaster, but it has never recovered from the blow struck by the flow of easy money from the US Government.

Obama did add in his talk: "We'll invest your precious tax dollars in new and smarter ways, and we'll set a simple rule – use it or lose it. If a state doesn't act quickly to invest in roads and bridges in their communities, they'll lose the money."

But it's the US Government and US law which is huge obstacle to spending road and bridge money expeditiously. There's the NEPA Act and other requirements for alternatives analyses,

public outreach and environmental impact analysis and its many other rules and regulations. Also the whole huge anti-car/anti-roads lobby, the enviros and the NIMBYs and the transit fantasists who think we should all ride trolleys or bicycles rather than cars, the people who campaign and litigate against every road project - just the kind of people who got so enthusiastic about our new president...these people are not suddenly going allow big road projects to move quickly ahead.

So maybe this big Obama initiative will be a fizzer, lots of minor inconsequential projects all over the place that can be worked through below all the federal rules and regulations.

Another thing - modern road and bridge work isn't something anyone can do. It employs specialized workers and specialized equipment. It isn't performed - even in India and China - by people with hammers breaking stones or moving dirt with picks and shovels.

You can't quickly employ tens of thousands of new workers building modern roads and bridges who previously worked in car factories, banks, housing or brokerages.

Is this change you can believe in?

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