

# Politics, highways wasteful combination

Politics and highways make a costly and wasteful combination. State legislators are notorious for demanding roads for their home districts, regardless of actual need. Highway funds, instead of being spent wisely, all too often become prizes for the most skillful political maneuvering.

Recognizing this, the Georgia Senate Transportation Committee recently recommended that state legislature be kept out of the process of selecting routes for new highways.



Removing politics from such decisions is a sound idea. However, the Transportation Committee's report doesn't fully address the problem. It recommends that the Department of Transportation and the Economic Development Council decide highway routes. Yet these are still unquestionably political bodies, and as such they lack the discipline of the marketplace and are susceptible to political

pressure.

Furthermore, the proposal still leaves funding and other crucial areas to the state legislature.

There's a far better solution. The government should simply get out of highway building altogether, and turn the whole process over to the private sector.

Does that sound wacky? It shouldn't. After all, highways—like grocery stores and clothing stores—are valuable and needed commercial services. We don't expect the government to provide our food or clothing—one glance at socialist countries illustrates that folly. So why should government be in the road building business?

There is a long and honorable—if little-known—history of privately run roads in America. In 1821, New York had 278 private turnpike firms, operating 4,000 miles of top-grade roads. Pennsylvania had 84 road companies with over 1800 miles of road. There are numerous other examples.

These weren't mere trails, either. They were state-of-the-art, innovative, quality roads. In fact, the first road in America to

use asphalt surfacing was a private turnpike.

How were they paid for? Partly by small tolls, and partly by stock sales. Much of the stock was bought by businesses, farmers, manufacturers, and others who stood to benefit financially from the roads.

This process insured that the roads were paid for by those who wanted and used them, and that they weren't built where there was insufficient need—a stark contrast to today's system, where roads are built anywhere and everywhere for political reasons, and funded coercively by taxation and the ugly process of eminent domain.

Private highways faded away not because they weren't viable, but because of government intervention. In the late 1800's, the federal government granted enormous subsidies to railroads, giving them unfair competitive advantages. Also, persons who wanted new roads, but preferred to saddle the public with the tab, began lobbying for government to take over highway construction. Politicians—seeing possibilities for political gain—

happily obliged.

The idea of applying market discipline to highway management is still a sound one, and a growing number of free-market thinkers are taking it seriously. As road taxes continue to increase, as unjustifiable roads continue to be built, and as taxpayers begin to face the awesome costs of repairing the nation's over-built and aging infrastructure, the concept will become increasingly attractive.

Toll roads would be a good start. There are over 4000 miles of toll roads in America today, and studies show they are better maintained and more efficiently run than their tax-funded counterparts.

Ultimately, total privatization—selling the highways to private entrepreneurs who would run them for a profit—would be even more efficient and fair. Highways genuinely desired by the public would generate profits, and competition would keep fees at a reasonable level. New roads would be built by private investors, and they would succeed

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## Wasteful

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or fail depending on how well they met the needs of the public.

Government-funded highways are demonstrably wasteful and unfair—and unnecessary. Moving in the direction of the marketplace—whether partially, through toll funding, or fully through total privatization—makes a lot more sense.