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Guest commentary: Transportation bill must keep local communities in mind

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With the current federal highway transportation bill set to expire at the end of March, there has been much discussion related to the future of infrastructure funding in the United States. Earlier this year, the U.S. House presented its version of a reauthorization bill, named the American Energy & Infrastructure Jobs Act (H.R. 7), which essentially would thrust transportation planning back to the early 1950s.

Fortunately for American cities, this bill has stalled. In the meantime, the U.S. Senate has passed a separate plan. The House should forsake its original plan and embrace the bipartisan surface transportation plan that overwhelmingly passed the Senate.

Called Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century (S.R. 1831), the House must carefully consider the measure, as it is significantly more favorable for urban areas such as Detroit and its inner-ring suburbs than the initial House bill, which reflects an outdated philosophy about how people use America's roads and further ignores the importance of safe roads, communities, places and people.

As a transportation engineer deeply vested in these issues, I firmly believe that the act debated by the House would be especially detrimental to communities from Detroit to Ferndale to Birmingham; communities that have worked so hard in recent years to improve the quality of life through personal accessibility in their downtowns and neighborhoods. The amenities that have drawn people to move, work and play in so-called walkable communities would be threatened if the House tries to fight the Senate plan to make it more like the measure that stalled last month.

The House plan, H.R. 7, would widen roadways, increase average vehicle speeds and generally encourage people to stay in their cars as they speed through and away from communities with thriving downtown areas that rely on foot traffic. Claiming to be drafted in the name of progress, H.R. 7 would actually have the opposite effect.

Midtown and southwest Detroit, which have benefitted from the federally funded Transportation Enhancement Program, would be greatly harmed. This program sets aside a small amount of transportation funds as part of a competitive grant process that focuses on many of the tenants that recent Complete Streets legislation hopes to encourage.

In fact, many signature local projects wouldn't have been completed without these federal grants, including the Crow's Nest at 9 Mile Road in Ferndale, the West Vernor Avenue streetscape project in southwest Detroit, and the Southwest Detroit Greenlink.

The House bill eliminated the Transportation Enhancement Program, along with others, in the name of "funding flexibility," and it's backed by many large companies that would benefit from the focus on major road projects. The reality is that many key projects wouldn't have received funding without this program.

While such projects could compete for grants under H.R. 7, they would have to go through the same application process as major road and highway projects, and the selection criteria are fundamentally biased toward projects that improve vehicular flow. This predisposition toward adding more lanes and widening roads, which in turn increases traffic and allows vehicles to go faster, makes surface roads more dangerous for other users. For urban communities in particular, projects to enhance streetscapes or improve pedestrian experiences would inherently be more difficult to get funded.

Michigan passed a law in 2010 supporting Complete Streets, which are designed and operated to enable safe access for all users, and many counties and local communities have since followed suit. It is imperative for Congress to ensure the federal legislation allows state and local governments to sustain that headway. Roads need to be not only adequate, but safe for the aging population, bicyclists and pedestrians and yet this measure does not take those needs into consideration.

One stark example of the legislation's implications: the House version eliminates the Safe Routes to School program, which has provided funding to more than 475 Michigan schools to help reduce traffic and pollution near schools, making walking and bicycling to school safer and more appealing, in turn encouraging children to be active and healthy.

The House bill would also end the technical assistance program operated under a cooperative agreement by the America's Byways Resource Center and eliminates any funding set-aside for a national competitive grant program. If it goes away, it would dramatically impact every Woodward Avenue community from Detroit to Pontiac that has received federal funding through the

Woodward Avenue Action Association (WA3). Since 2004, the WA3 has received and granted more than \$5 million in funding projects. Examples include the 12 Mile Woodward Crosswalk Project with Berkley and Royal Oak, the Midtown Greenway Loop, the City of Birmingham Crosswalk Study, and the South Oakland non-motorized plan, among many others.

Congress must not allow the transportation act to turn back the clock to 1950, when people didn't worry about car pollution or traffic, the middle class began fleeing to the suburbs and city centers started crumbling. Contact your representative and tell him or her that Congress should be looking ahead to 2050 and envisioning a positive future for our communities and our quality of life.

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