

## **Transition 2020: Porcari: Get ready for a stimulus bill, and a change to right-of-ways under Biden**

BY **TANYA SNYDER** | 11/12/2020 05:04 PM EST

Biden transportation adviser John Porcari told state DOT leaders Thursday to start preparing for a stimulus bill that could include infrastructure projects both large and small, suggesting this approach would incorporate lessons learned from the previous stimulus plan implemented by President Barack Obama's administration.

Shovel-worthy: Porcari, who was deputy secretary at DOT in 2009 and helped manage the department's part of the stimulus program, said administering that program showed the need for a "high/low mix" of projects that run the gamut from basic street paving to "transformative, multi-year expensive projects at the high end" — with an emphasis on "long-term, transformative benefits" when it comes to project eligibility. He spoke at the now-virtual annual meeting of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

President-elect Joe Biden's DOT will be looking for "not just shovel-ready projects, but shovel-worthy — the ones that are actually worth doing, even if they're not the ones that are the easiest to get off the ground," Porcari said. The Obama administration's emphasis on so-called shovel-ready projects was roundly criticized in the wake of the 2009 stimulus, with even Obama later admitting "there's no such thing."

The most efficient way to quickly expand the capacity of the government to tackle big project, Porcari said, is to "plus up" the existing allocations and formulas and then augment that with what he called "TIGER on steroids," referring to a grant program created under the Recovery Act that has endured under the new name BUILD. This approach echoes the infrastructure proposal put forward by the Biden campaign, which suggested he will look to use existing mechanisms for his big infrastructure vision.

"You need to kind of flood the zone with both more on the formula side and more on the competitive grant side," he said. "It can't be a zero sum game for the state DOTs."

"Think of it as the world's largest bond issuance," he told state DOT officials. "When you're issuing debt, you first have to show that you're good stewards of the resources that are out there, that fix-it-first is more than just a slogan, that it's actually being operationalized every day."

Porcari said the department will be looking for projects that provide a bridge to the future, like artificial intelligence, connected and autonomous vehicles and fleet electrification. "All of those will be baked into our program," he said.

Get ready now: Porcari told those gathered virtually that they should be going through their "internal checklist" now, in preparation for a stimulus or the next surface transportation bill.

"Have you tuned up your procurement program to be faster and more efficient?" he said. "Can you do partial notices to proceed to get projects out the door more quickly? Have you made the rounds in your state in a listening tour to actually put together that mix of projects, high-end and low-end, that you can get out the door fairly quickly and be transformative in the long term? Have you had the conversations with your elected officials, the legislature, for example, to have a program ready?"

"Those are all checklist items that you can actually go through right now to be ready for what's next," he said.

Porcari also encouraged state DOTs to "think about transportation investments, not as an end in themselves" but as a way to improve quality of life, create economic development and local employment and address long-standing inequities in the infrastructure network — as well as mitigate and prepare for climate change.

Other areas of focus: Porcari also teased some program elements that are “highly likely” to be a focus of Biden’s DOT, including project review streamlining, climate change resiliency, safety and the good stewardship of public dollars.

— Driverless cars: Porcari said the department will also prioritize the creation of a national framework for connected and autonomous vehicles, something the Trump DOT has handled only through voluntary guidance.

— Rail: He also suggested rail as a substitute for air service in some places, especially to connect destinations within 400 or 500 miles of each other. For instance, he said that Minneapolis-St. Paul to Milwaukee could be one route they’re eyeing, with the goal of then bringing “city pairs” like this into a national system. (Notably, he didn’t use the phrase “high-speed rail.”)

“Many of you are living the reality of the loss of air service — sometimes substantial or total loss of air service — to small and medium sized jurisdictions,” Porcari told the DOT officials. “If anything, that trend is going to accelerate.”

— Rights-of-way: The approach to rights-of-way will also change “from an ownership model of right-of-way to a stewardship model,” Porcari said. That means it should be applied to “the highest and best use for the right-of-way, not just the transportation use.” He said rural broadband or clean energy transmission could take precedence in some states as the most important use.

Worth noting: Personnel nominations have not yet been issued and it’s unclear what position, if any, Porcari will hold in Biden’s DOT, but he spoke with authority and confidence that the vision he was laying out was aligned with Biden's.

*[Click here for more Pro 2020 Transition coverage](#), and be sure to sign up for the following topics on your [settings page](#) to ensure you receive all the transition content you need: Transitions and Departures, White House, Presidential Elections.*