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Transportation Research Forum

Book Review: [Taking the High Road: A Metropolitan Agenda for Transportation Reform](#)

Book Author(s): Bruce Katz and Robert Puentes

Review Author(s): Joshua Schank

Source: *Journal of the Transportation Research Forum*, Vol. 47, No. 4 (Fall 2008), pp. 147-149

Published by: [Transportation Research Forum](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.trforum.org/journal>

The Transportation Research Forum, founded in 1958, is an independent, nonprofit organization of transportation professionals who conduct, use, and benefit from research. Its purpose is to provide an impartial meeting ground for carriers, shippers, government officials, consultants, university researchers, suppliers, and others seeking exchange of information and ideas related to both passenger and freight transportation. More information on the Transportation Research Forum can be found on the Web at www.trforum.org.

Katz, Bruce, and Puentes, Robert. Taking the High Road: A Metropolitan Agenda for Transportation Reform. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2005. ISBN 0-8157-4827-2.

Taking the High Road

by Joshua Schank

This collection of essays, most of which examine federal transportation policy, was assembled and in several cases written by two esteemed scholars at the Brookings Institution. It is of no surprise, therefore, that the work contained within this volume is of exceptional quality. Every piece is well-researched and documented, well-organized, and usually makes a reasoned case for whatever specific point is being made. On the other hand, many of the essays leave the reader wondering if any new ground has been broken in that specific area of debate. The work contained in this book is not particularly creative, groundbreaking, or thought-provoking for those who have studied transportation policy extensively. It is, however, excellent and extremely pertinent information for readers who need to understand the basic issues on the table.

Admittedly, some of the lack of pop in this collection is due to the fact that it is already a little dated. The book was released in 2005 and was intended to influence the last surface transportation reauthorization bill, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act – A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU), which passed Congress that same year. Now Washington is already gearing up for the next bill as SAFETEA-LU is set to expire in October 2009. This makes the book relevant again, even if some of the content may be dated, as policymakers interested in the new bill need to take a good look at some of the essays in this volume. The book also makes apparent how difficult it was for real change to occur in the last reauthorization, as many of the issues brought up in this book were not tackled at all in the last bill. However, circumstances for this reauthorization may be quite different as there will be a new Congress, new administration, and a deficit in the Highway Trust Fund all hopefully spurring substantial change.

Some of the essays are particularly well-written and relevant. For example, Chapter 4 on equity and efficiency in transportation finance, written by Martin Wachs, describes the biggest issue facing federal transportation policy in an extremely effective manner in only 20 pages. The article does not appear biased or agenda-driven, and spells out some of the most important challenges in transportation policy in a cohesive and understandable manner. Chapter 10 seems more agenda driven, but Edward Beimborn and Puentes similarly lay out a very effective argument for why transit is short-changed by the federal government. All Congressional and White House staff working on reauthorization should read this chapter. The authors probably could have gone even further if they examined the history of highway and transit funding, as well as biased policies in other areas, in greater detail. One question the chapter raises is why flex funding for transit is used so rarely; this could be a useful issue for further study.

Similarly, Chapters 2 and 3 provide some essential information. Chapter 2, which deals with how federal transportation policy affects urban areas, lays out the argument for metropolitan area emphasis very effectively. Puentes and Katz wrote this chapter along with Scott Bernstein, and these three individuals probably know more about this particular issue than almost anyone. There are some gaps, particularly the fact that there is no mention of the issue of climate change, which will strongly impact metropolitan areas. Also, the authors probably overstate the federal role in increased transit use. However, the larger point about biases in federal programs towards highways and against metropolitan areas is salient. The authors also note, before this concept was as commonly

proposed as it is today, the need to introduce performance measures into federal transportation funding policy.

Chapter 3, also written by Puentes but with Ryan Prince, provides an excellent overview of financing issues in federal transportation policy. Their discussion of intrastate equity, and the similar discussion in Chapter 5, is interesting but the issue is more complicated than what is presented here. In fact, Martin Wachs makes a contradicting point in his chapter when he challenges the wisdom of the donor/donee battle. The issue here is not funding “equity” for metropolitan areas, but why politicians are able to get away with letting roads in urban areas deteriorate. The answer seems obvious – because rural areas are over-represented in the Senate. This implies that the answer is either to convince elected officials from rural areas that they should let metropolitan areas have more money, or change the Constitution so that representation is more in line with modern society. Both options are extremely unlikely, but at least changing the Constitution to reflect our urban nation would have broader and more long-lasting effects beyond this one issue. Either way, it is important to get to the root of this issue if we are to understand and deal with it.

Chapter 6, in which Puentes and Linda Bailey assess metropolitan decision-making, brings needed attention to the complicated and seemingly endless issue of how to deal with metropolitan planning organizations (MPOs). As with most of the work in this book, the information in the chapter is excellent and will serve policy-makers well. The policy conclusions, on the other hand, are shakier. For example, one might question the need to perform an analysis that shows that state DOTs are not as likely to spend money on transit as MPOs (this seems patently obvious). Moreover, the case for increasing the suballocated amounts to MPOs is not made effectively. Although MPOs are more likely to be attuned to local needs, states are still in possession of the levers of power - in most cases even over the money that is suballocated - so increasing that amount will not do much. Finally, the call for accountability is commendable, but how can MPOs be held accountable when most decisions are not really in their power?

Chapter 7, by Puentes and Anthony Downs, provides some much-needed perspective on the issue of traffic congestion. The article does a good job of diagnosing the problem, but is short on solutions. However, the piece does imply an interesting solution when discussing the need for a crisis in order to spur change. This idea could be expanded upon to consider how incentives can imitate some of the issues that arise in a crisis. Such a concept was explored recently through the Urban Partnership (UPA) program when DOT used additional transit funding as a “carrot” to bring about policy change.

Evelyn Blumenberg and Margy Waller explore spatial mismatch theory and the policies intended to deal with it in Chapter 8. Much of their discussion centers on the Job Access Reverse Commute (JARC) program, which in many ways is a successful federal program. However, JARC’s success does not mean that there is a clear role for the federal government in this area. The article brings to light the larger issue of the appropriate federal role: Is it the federal government’s job to provide access to suburban jobs for inner city commuters? Perhaps, but if so, why? That argument needs to be made. Each metro area may have a different way of dealing with spatial mismatch, and the JARC solution may not apply in all areas. The federal government should provide funds to metro areas and those areas should use them in the way that best meets their needs in accordance with federal goals. Matching jobs to transportation is not a federal goal; economic growth and job creation probably are though, and perhaps this program should be merged into something larger along those lines.

Chapter 9 brings up similar issues. Sandra Rosenbloom does an excellent job of laying out the key issues in transportation for the elderly. In particular, her “Debunking the Myths of Elderly Travel Needs” provides an observant and insightful overview. But again, there is no convincing argument in the chapter for why this is a federal issue rather than a local one. In fact, the author’s explanation of the local complications involved undermines the argument for federal involvement. Some possible innovations that could really help at the local level, but are not discussed in this chapter, include improved drivers license screening and restrictions, and land use planning that takes age and changes in driver behavior into account.

Finally, Chapter 11 is very well-researched but seems out of place in this book. The article, by Arnold Howitt and Jon Makler, seems inserted into the book as a result of September 11th and not very relevant to the future of transportation policy. Although this may be excused in part by timing, the article would have been more informative had it provided some real policy teeth. This would have been nearly impossible, though, because this is not really a transportation problem – it is an intelligence and security problem, to which one is hard put to discuss effective transportation solutions.

Joshua Schank is director of transportation research at the Bipartisan Policy Center, Washington, D.C. He previously worked as a consultant with Parsons Brinckerhoff and as the transportation policy advisor to Senator Hillary Clinton, working on the most recent reauthorization of the surface transportation bill (SAFETEA-LU). He has also worked as an analyst at the U.S. Department of Transportation Office of the Inspector General, and as a transportation planner at the Metropolitan Transportation Authority in New York City. He currently serves as the president of the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Transportation Research Forum. Joshua has a Ph.D. in urban planning from Columbia University, a master of city planning from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and a B.A. in urban studies from Columbia University. He has published numerous articles on transportation policy and planning, and his first book, All Roads Lead to Congress: The \$300 Billion Fight over Highway Funding, was published in October 2007.