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Q.&A.: Transportation Secretary on Biking, Walking and ‘What Americans Want’

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The United States transportation secretary, Ray LaHood, recently caused a stir when he proclaimed that bicycling and walking should be given the same consideration as motorized transport in state and local transit projects.



Agence France-Presse/Getty Images “It’s what Americans want to do,” said Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, of his emphasis on the role of bicycles and walking in good transportation policy

Supporters, who continue to post notes of adulation and thanks on Mr. LaHood’s Facebook page, say the acknowledgment of biking and walking as legitimate modes of transportation is long overdue.

Critics, conversely, believe the secretary is taking the country in the wrong direction.

Mr. LaHood, formerly a Republican congressman from Illinois, spoke with Green Inc. about his reasons for introducing the new policy, the impact it will have on transportation financing, and why bike paths are a good bang for the buck.

Q.

Bicycling and walking advocates had a very positive reaction to the policy change. But here at Green Inc., we heard mostly from critics who said it showed you were “delusional” or reflective of some sort of “Maoist” bent. What’s your response to the response?

A.

My response is that this is what Americans want. Americans want alternatives. People are always going to drive cars. We’re always going to have highways. We’ve made a huge investment in our interstate highway system. We’ll always continue to make sure that those investments in the highways are maintained.

But, what Americans want is to get out of their cars, and get out of congestion, and have opportunities for more transit, more light rail, more buses, and some communities are going to street cars. But many communities want the opportunity on the weekends and during the week to have the chance to bike to work, to bike to the store, to spend time with their family on a bike.

So, this is not just Ray LaHood’s agenda, this is the American agenda that the American people want for alternatives to the automobile.

What’s happened around America is people are buying bikes and they’re using them for recreational purposes on the weekend and there’s no better family way for people to spend a weekend than riding their bikes on these biking trails.

This is what Americans want and we’re accommodating their needs to really find places to recreate. And what could be healthier than taking a 30-minute walk, which is recommended by every doctor in America, or hopping on your bike and riding four, five or six miles and enjoying the great outdoors?

Look, this is a win-win. This is a way for people to get out of their cars, a way for people to recreate, a way for people to get good exercise, and it’s what Americans want to do.

Q.

In announcing the new policy, you used pretty forceful language, saying it was a “sea change” and “the end of favoring motorized transportation at the expense of nonmotorized.” The actual policy, however, is more benign in tone, saying, “well-connected walking and bicycling networks is an important component for livable communities, and their design should be a part of federal-aid project developments.”

Do you stand by your initial characterization of the policy?

A.

I think that livable and sustainable communities is a game changer. It's a game changer because it's what Americans want. It's a game changer because people do want to get out of congestion, they want to get out of their cars, they want to be able to enjoy the outdoors, they want to be able to recreate with their families.

And so it's a game changer from the point of view that it's a major component of livable and sustainable communities that provide alternatives to automobiles. And some of it is transit, some of it is light rail, some of it is street cars, some of it is good buses. But certainly a big part of it is the opportunity to bike or walk to the grocery store, to work, to the drug store or just spending time with the family and getting some good exercise.

Q.

In terms of the way federal transportation dollars will be spent on the ground, is this a zero sum game? Does more money for biking and walking mean less money for motorways?

A.

We're always going to take care of our highways. As I said, we have a state-of-the-art interstate system that's been developed over three or four decades. We're not going to give up on our roads. We know people are always going to drive cars. They're going to use their cars for long distances.

But as we develop our livable and sustainable communities program, biking and walking paths will be a major component of it. And they will get some significant dollars.

Q.

In response to the policy change, a member of Congress said he didn't understand how you get a bang for the buck out of a bicycle project. Why do you think they're a good investment?

A.

You don't have to get a bang for the buck in every form of transportation. Certainly, transit, it provides a good bus or light rail or other kinds of transportation services. But, they don't make money doing it.

This is a good bang for the buck because it provides alternatives to people, and good exercise, and for people who are very health conscious and for people who want to spend time with their families.

This is a win, win, win. It incorporates a lot of different opportunities for people and it's a good bang for good health, and a good bang for a different form of transportation, and it's what the American people want.

Q.

Was there any particular reason you wanted to introduce the new policy now?

A.

It has more to do with the fact that we're rolling out our livable and sustainable communities as we travel around the country and I also was at a huge bikers' conference in Washington, D.C., and we wanted to give them the chance to really understand that all of their hard work over a long period of time has finally paid off. There's an administration in place now that has taken to heart their request for more walking and biking paths