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Getting the most from an infrastructure bill

By former Rep. Martin Lancaster and Robert Dawson

William Gianelli, who was President Reagan's first assistant secretary of the Army for Civil Works, passed away recently in California at age 101. His policies on U.S. infrastructure continue to have a major influence long after he left Washington.

As former assistant secretaries of the Army for Civil Works, the same position he held, we urge Congress to recognize the important policies that Bill pushed to become part of the landmark 1986 Water Resources Development Act (WRDA). The lessons from this act are especially important since infrastructure is likely to be in a future coronavirus stimulus. Among the policies that should guide Congress on infrastructure spending are:

Cost-sharing. Given strained state and local budgets, some elements of cost sharing and user fees would help legitimize and prioritize projects and encourage public support. This was a new policy in the 1986 WRDA, which required sponsors to put their

own money toward their water infrastructure projects. In accordance with this law, sponsors must fund from 25 percent to as much as 70 percent of project cost, which helps ensure the importance and value of these projects. At the time, some participants resisted this change but smarter heads, led by our predecessor Bill Gianelli, along with Rep. Bob Roe (D-Nj.) and Sen. Jim Abdnor (R-SD), chairs of the House and Senate Authorization Committees, prevailed.

Some Members of Congress may grind their teeth about this provision. But experience shows that this feature helps give committees more substantive ability during the authorization process to approve only projects with material sponsor support. During the budget process, this feature also helps worthy projects compete for funds with other valuable programs. The ability for committee chairs to push for higher funding on the grounds that sponsors are willing to pay is especially appealing if those other programs are more politically

appealing. Most important, greater cost sharing means more money available for additional projects.

Respecting the Corps of Engineers' role.

This is critically important to the process. The Army Corps of Engineers has a unique role in managing U.S. infrastructure projects. The Corps works closely with project sponsors to ensure that project purposes can be achieved at the earliest possible time. The Corps also requires projects to be environmentally acceptable and produce economic benefits that exceed all project costs, often substantially so. This process ensures that taxpayer dollars are a productive investment and not a political earmark, having gone through an extensive review process supported by local sponsors willing and able to share the project costs.

To make the legislation successful, members of Congress should make clear in both the bill's language and in their own communication with constituents that the review process with the Corps of Engineers must be respected.

Experience shows the value of these processes. The 1986 water infrastructure bill would never have occurred had Corps of Engineer officials not traveled around the country a year prior to passage, obtaining signed cost-sharing agreements with project sponsors. The Corps' message was clear and effective: "If you want to be one of the first projects approved, you need to treat this

seriously." That included details on cost-sharing and permit-related information.

Avoiding contentious policy issues. The 2014 WRDA focused not only on water projects but also on several unusual issues not related to specific projects. For example, the law tried to mediate disputes among Alabama, Florida and Georgia over apportionment of their river basins.

In our view, it is laudable for Congress to try to forge resolutions, especially on interstate issues, but we think it was a mistake to include these in infrastructure legislation. In disputes of this kind, there ultimately have to be some winners and some losers. The fights these issues can spur can tie up infrastructure legislation for months or years. By focusing only on environmentally acceptable authorized projects with proven economic benefits, committees will encourage stronger support and move faster when jobs and dollars are desperately needed.

The economic stakes for federal infrastructure legislation are huge. The U.S. is part of a competitive global economy and the competition is only going to intensify. Many countries want to emerge from the coronavirus fight in a stronger economic position than the U.S. If we allocate federal funds toward our ports, inland waterways and flood protection in an effective, efficient way, we will spur growth, protect the environment, reduce transportation costs and

improve the competitiveness of our products, particularly farm products.

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