

Editorial

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 11, 2021

Build sensible bridge to future

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The debate over infrastructure spending began even before President Biden put forth his original proposal. But much debate has shed more heat than light.

Some focus only on the price. Others try to assert that infrastructure only means roads and bridges, ignoring that water systems have been part of infrastructure at least since the first Roman aqueduct, and failing to take into account that the “information highway” is more important to the functioning of the modern world than any interstate.

If we want to make smart decisions about infrastructure, we must ask: What’s the price tag of not investing in infrastructure, who and what is the spending for, and what

sort of future does it commit us to?

Big savings from bold, ambitious infrastructure plans can come from investing in programs that can help prevent or mitigate climate change. Setting up national infrastructure for charging electric cars won’t be cheap. But if it helps prevent climate disasters it will save billions of dollars and thousands of lives. Similarly, large-scale investments in clean energy technologies and research for new technologies come with a substantial price tag. But if those investments are substantial enough, they will result in new jobs, a transformed economy and a future that with cleaner air and fewer extreme climate events.

We need to consider who benefits from any particular infrastructure investment. If

we replace all lead pipes children at some 400,000 schools and day care centers and in as many as 10 million homes will have brighter, more productive futures. Because communities of colors, tribes and low-wealth communities are disproportionately exposed to unsafe drinking water, we should upgrade water systems serving such communities. Sewage systems could be updated to handle present problems and the increasing frequency of severe storms due to climate change.

Contrast such spending with narrowly defined infrastructure projects, or those that bring profits to special interests instead of benefits to all Americans.

Such choices are explored in religious texts. The Talmud, for example, records a conversation about the infrastructure policies of the Roman empire. While one rabbi praises what they have built, another notes that they only build marketplac-

es for profit and exploitation, build bridges so that they can levy tolls. This is contrasted to the patriarch Jacob, who built infrastructure in gratitude for God’s kindness, building marketplaces to provide food and goods for those who had no access and bridges so people could travel safely. A famous Gospel passage from Matthew, “for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” could apply to the choice of infrastructure investments.

Today we could add, “where your infrastructure investments are, there your future will be also.” Societies that sink billions into fossil fuel pipelines will continue to pump more and more fossil fuel through that pipeline. The wrong infrastructure anchors us into the depths of a hellish, heat-scorched future.

Instead, we should focus on building bridges to a tomorrow that is healthier, more sustainable and more equitable.



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