

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2536
July 10, 2009

Obama Administration's Plan to Coerce People out of Their Cars

Ronald D. Utt

Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood remarked in May that his livability initiative¹ “is a way to coerce people out of their cars.”² When asked if this was government intrusion into people’s lives, LaHood responded that “about everything we do around here is government intrusion in people’s lives,” a sentiment that would have certainly surprised the authors of the United States Constitution, a document whose major purpose was to *restrain* government.

LaHood’s endorsement of government coercion comes as no surprise to those who have been tracking the Obama Administration’s incremental endorsements of the environmentalists’ smart growth strategies to slow growth, crowd development, and deter automobile use. And with LaHood’s most recent presentation, the Administration has formally embarked on an unprecedented and costly exercise in social engineering to alter the way Americans live and travel.

Getting the Facts Wrong. In justifying the necessity of coercing Americans out of their cars, LaHood added that “people don’t like spending an hour and a half getting to work. And people don’t like spending an hour going to the grocery store.” For LaHood, these exaggerations justify a new federal transportation policy in which “we have to create opportunities for people that do want to use a bicycle or want to walk or want to get on a street car or want to ride light rail.” Yet as the record reveals, LaHood’s statement is replete with errors and inaccuracies.

- For starters, how is it that getting people to walk or bicycle to work or to the grocery store will get them there faster? Other than infrequent situations in the center of a handful of dense urban areas in the middle of rush hour, this proposal to reduce travel time is naïve and inconsistent with common sense.
- LaHood’s implication that people in the Washington area spend one and a half hours getting to work and an hour getting to the grocery store is simply not true. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average commute in America is 25 minutes, and in Virginia, where many of Washington’s workers live, the average commute is 27 minutes. In Fairfax County, Washington’s largest suburb, the commute time is 31 minutes, while in the major exurb of Prince William County (30 miles south of D.C.), the commute time is 37 minutes.³ As for the alleged hour-long trip to a Washington-area grocery store, an hour would be enough time for LaHood to travel from his office in Washington to a grocery store in Baltimore.
- LaHood cites Portland, Oregon, as an example of what can be achieved with a retro transportation policy and costly investment in light rail. But,

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/wm2536.cfm

Produced by the Thomas A. Roe Institute
for Economic Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

sadly, his assertion reveals a predilection for urban legends over information produced by his employer, the federal government. As Wendell Cox pointed out using federal government data, “In 1985, approximately 2.1 percent of motorized travel in the Portland urban area was on transit and it remained 2.1 percent in 2007, the latest year for which data is available.” Moreover, only 1.7 percent of Portland commuters to downtown use bicycles, an amount less than the share of Americans who walk to work.⁴

Is It Safe to Let LaHood Think Outside the Box? Given the important position that LaHood holds in this Administration, and given the federal government’s central role in the nation’s transportation system, his statements are cause for worry. Even more worrisome—given his admission that we “have to think outside the box”—is his seeming admiration of an early 20th-century lifestyle and his attraction to the kind of travel arrangements common to America before automobiles became the preferred (and most affordable) choice of travel.

More to the point, as LaHood uses his position of influence to recreate the “old paradigm,” the real concern is just how far back into the past he wants to drag us. Cynical readers will note that this nostalgic transportation system was heavily dependent upon horses and oxen. While this prospect may seem far-fetched, six months ago it would have seemed far-fetched that a senior Administration official would endorse coercion to alter our lifestyles.

With quaint notions of “far-fetched” becoming the “new normal” in the Obama Administration, skeptics of these retrograde policies might want to adjust their defensive preparations in expectation of the worst. Indeed, they should wonder: When is enough enough? Yet as the remainder of this paper

will suggest, a full-throated, back-to-the-past policy could offer certain unique benefits to those who yearn for yesteryear.

Specifically, this retro approach to transportation would mean restoring animals—notably horses and oxen—to a central role in America’s transportation system. In turn, this would create a significant number of “green” jobs to offset those lost in the outsourcing-dependent bailout of General Motors and Chrysler.

For starters, animal restoration would fulfill the longstanding federal policy of increasing farm incomes by shifting farm land from people food to animal food, thereby raising the price of all agriculture products. And unlike automobiles and trucks—whose effluence many believe causes global warming—these animals would provide substantial volumes of “compost” that can be recycled to foster the “grow locally, eat locally” organic food movement.

And while some might argue that equine flatulence could become a major greenhouse gas problem, Vermont dairy farmers have discovered that a diet containing flax seed, alfalfa, and grasses high in fatty acids can reduce the methane problem.⁵

Importantly, the collection of “compost” from city streets will create hundreds of thousands of “green jobs” at a time of worsening unemployment, and these newly hired workers, in turn, could be organized into any one of the service worker unions that support this Administration.

At the same time, the use of these animals for transportation will also require a huge increase in related “green jobs” such as stable workers, horse breeders and trainers, and, of course, Teamsters needed to guide these creatures as they go about

1. Ronald D. Utt, “President Obama’s New Plan to Decide Where Americans Live and How They Travel,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2260, April 13, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/SmartGrowth/bg2260.cfm>.
2. LaHood’s entire presentation and Q&A session at the National Press Club is available on video at <http://press.org/video/player.cfm?type=lunch&id=17766> (July 8, 2009).
3. All commute time data from the U.S. Census Bureau, “American Community Survey, Selected Economic Characteristics: 2007,” selected jurisdictions.
4. Wendell Cox, “Portland: A Model for National Policy?” *Newgeography.com*, May 28, 2009, at <http://www.newgeography.com/content/00818-portland-a-model-national-policy> (July 9, 2009).
5. Lisa Rathke, “Greener Diet Reduces Cows Burps,” *Free-Lance Star* (Fredericksburg, VA), June 22, 2009, p. A-1.

their daily routine of providing us with vital transportation services. These too can be unionized.

Finally, as vegetarians, horses and oxen serve as worthy role models, forcing carnivorous humans to question their place in nature's grand order.

A Backwards Policy. While some may see the above prospects as preposterous, do note that many of the Administration's policies depend upon a reversion to archaic practices abandoned centuries and decades ago as new technologies allowed for

better service at lower costs. If this Administration is prepared to bet our future on the technologies and lifestyles of the past—electric cars, passenger rail, trolleys, small houses, bicycles, and nationalized industries—then a greater dependence upon eco-friendly animals would be a nice fit for a fashionably primitive America.

—*Ronald D. Utt, Ph.D., is Herbert and Joyce Morgan Senior Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.*