

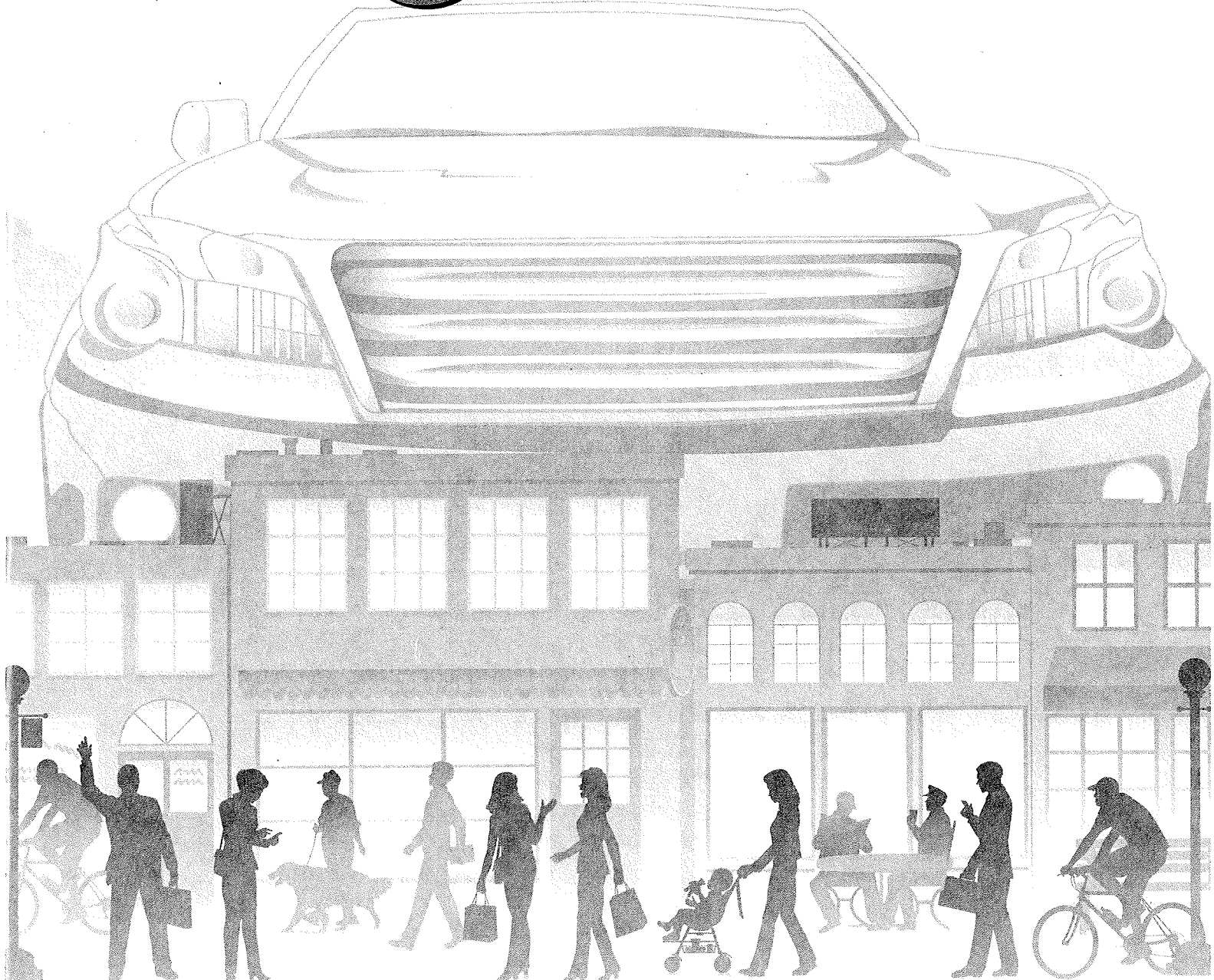
CQ WEEKLY

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Livability vs. Reality

The only thing bigger than Obama's plans for green transportation and more 'livable' communities: America's addiction to the automobile. P.1498

Driving Debate

Obama wants to end America's obsession with cars, but he'll have to fight to do so. The long-overdue surface transportation reauthorization promises an early skirmish.

BY KATHRYN A. WOLFE

WHEN TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY Ray LaHood said last year that the Obama administration wanted to “coerce people out of their cars,” he was being a bit blunter than he apparently intended to be — “coerce” has been softened to “lure” or “coax” in his subsequent talks on the subject — but the message came across clearly. President Obama thinks it is so important for Americans to reduce their dependence on oil, clear the air and relieve highway congestion that he is willing to go head to head with the nation’s car culture.

Just last week, Obama seized on the catastrophic oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico to condemn “America’s centurylong addiction to fossil fuels.”

“The tragedy unfolding on our coast,” he said in an Oval Office address, “is the most painful and powerful reminder yet that the time to embrace a clean energy future is now.”

What Obama and his Cabinet have embraced so far is a series of proposals — some new, some recycled — designed to provide alternatives to gasoline-powered transportation. Above all, the administra-

tion says it wants to foster “livable communities” where people can walk, bicycle, or take a bus or a train to work just as conveniently as they can get to their jobs in their cars. LaHood recently issued a policy declaration that bikes should have equal standing with cars in transportation policy decisions — a breathtaking departure that pleased cyclists but mystified highway planners.

Indeed, Obama has ordered LaHood’s Transportation Department to work closely with the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Environmental Protection Agency to promote livable communities — so they don’t, for instance, subsidize a new housing complex on one side of a city while laying track for transit service on the other.

Sometime this summer, the White House is expected to lay out its plan in more detail, just as Congress is promising to start working in earnest on a surface transportation reauthorization bill that’s a year overdue. In fact, the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, Minnesota Democrat James L. Oberstar, has incorporated some “livability” programs in his version of the legislation.





To this point, though, Obama's transportation program has been long on rhetoric but short on resources. The president and senior administration officials have talked about better coordination and leveraging money, and they have persuaded Congress to spend a few million here and a few million there on new programs. But the president himself has not made the political and financial commitment that would be necessary to actually change the direction of something as large as transportation policy. And given the financial pressures on the government and the economy, it's not at all clear that he'll be able to do so this year — or even next year, after the midterm election.

The reason Obama's transportation plan is so modest is simply that he has neither the fiscal nor political capital to launch a serious assault on the automobile and its attendant industry, which have dominated American culture and transportation policy for most of a century.

Americans just love their automobiles. It's a visceral, all-encompassing, sometimes destructive sort of relationship that touches on almost every facet of American life. In researching her book "Carjacked: The Culture of the Automobile and its Effect on Our Lives," Brown University anthropologist Catherine Lutz found

that cars are the country's favorite commodity. Three-quarters of us think an automobile is our most important possession — for some, more important than children. Of the 138 million Americans who commute to work, eight out of 10 get there, alone, in a car.

"Most people," Lutz wrote, "are distinctly uninterested in leaving their cars for the thin public transit system we now have."

Obama's critics, mainly Republicans, know this and label his proposals as attempts at "behavior modification," out of touch with their image of America, where the dream of homeownership involves a comfortable house in the suburbs with a couple of cars in the garage — not a condominium in a mixed-use neighborhood with a bicycle chained to a rack.

Mary Peters, when she was President George W. Bush's Transportation secretary, said bike paths and walking trails "really are not transportation, directly transportation-related." She put them in the

BACK TO THE FUTURE: A streetcar in Portland, Oregon. The city is showcased by the Obama administration as an example of a 'livable community,' where residents spend less time in their cars than most Americans.

same funding priority category as construction money for museums or for repairing lighthouses.

Obama's proposals do seem to pale alongside the highway network and its tens of millions of vehicles thundering across the land. Last year, for instance, Congress actually doubled the money the government had been spending on bike paths and walking trails in one year, to about \$1.2 billion.

But that amount would barely cover the cost of building two miles of some urban expressways.

Indeed, the highway lobby — mainly the roadbuilders, auto manufacturers and developers of suburban sprawl — seems content to tolerate the administration's interest in getting people to spend less time behind the wheel, as long as it doesn't threaten to reduce spending on roads or divert money from the Highway Trust Fund. If roadbuilders are uneasy at all, it is more for what the policy shift could represent down the road than what it is at the moment.

"It's just a notion at this point," said Brian Deery of the Associated General Contractors of America. "We all have sort of some idea of what the administration is talking about, but we've never really seen it articulated in a way that can be commented on and really discussed in public."

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED

The administration says its offers are not mandates; rather, they are options in which the public has expressed interest — bike lanes, for instance, and buses, streetcars and light rail.

"There are people who know that they can live without an automobile because there's good transportation in the communities or there's good walking paths or there's good biking paths," LaHood told an audience at the Brookings Institution last year, after the livable communities initiative was launched. "This is what the people in America want, and we're promoting it because of that."

A good example of livability, the White House says, is Portland, Ore., which has invested in streetcars, "light rail" trains that run on streets, buses and hundreds of miles of bicycle lanes. City leaders say the average resident travels 19 miles each day in a vehicle, down from 22 miles a day in 1996. That bucks a national upward trend. In 2008, the city estimates, more than 16,000 bicyclists commuted into and out of downtown each day, representing 13 percent of all commuters.



The average Portland family spends about 15 percent of its income on transportation, compared with a national average of about 20 percent.

Portland has also used incentives to real estate developers to steer growth to areas around transit centers, and it prohibits development in a band around the outskirts of the metro area, hoping to increase density inside the city and maintain the vitality of its downtown. In Oakland, Calif., meanwhile, some parking

garages have been turned into transit centers, complete with shopping and child care.

But skeptics of Obama's plans pounce on the Portland example as elitist and coercive. "Their goal is to design cities that are livable for the 15 percent or 20 percent of people who can't or don't want to rely on automobiles," said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, "and make cities hostile for the 80 percent or so of people who are happy to rely on automobiles."

Portland, O'Toole said, has refused to invest in congestion-mitigation measures such as increasing road capacity. "It seems to have been a trend across the country for urban planners to say we can't build our way out of congestion, so let's not try," he said. "Instead of finding financial means to pay for congestion relief, they seem to be interested in diverting as much money as they can to things that won't relieve congestion, such as street cars and light rail."

But that, says Shelley Poticha, an urban planner who a year ago became HUD's senior adviser for sustainable housing and communities, misses the point of what the administration is trying to do in providing options. She maintains that it is not an all-or-nothing proposition — having a car vs. not having a car — but a program to help people reduce their automobile use as much or as little as they want.

Pressure at the Pump

Americans' driving habits are heavily influenced by the price of gasoline; many were scared from their SUVs when prices reached \$4 a gallon in 2008, but it would take a much greater shock to change commuting habits for good.

Retail gasoline price per gallon

National monthly average



SOURCE: Energy Information Administration



LOCOMOTION PROMOTION: After LaHood said bicycles should have parity with cars in transportation policy, bikes groups rallied outside DOT headquarters to thank him. The administration says its goal is to allow Americans more options than the car for getting around.

about the options, and it's about using federal moneys efficiently."

Indeed, if there is a middle lane emerging in transportation policy, it is the notion of having things both ways until one or the other comes to dominate through the natural course of things. Some advocates of transportation alternatives think they are just on the right side of the trend that's going to happen anyway.

THE RISE OF GRADUALISM

Lutz, the anthropology professor, said her research showed that "there are a lot of people who would like to have more options, who would like to do more walking, who would like to have transit for certain trips." She said that "lot and lots of people who don't want to give up their cars still want increased public transit."

Sensing opportunity in such options, the Massachusetts-based car-sharing company Zipcar has even hired lobbying firms to spread the word on Capitol Hill about the role of car sharing.

Likewise, bike-sharing businesses are catching on in some U.S. cities for the first time.

Some recent statistics also support the notion that Americans are increasing their use of alternative transportation, however modestly. The Federal Highway Administration reported last week that Americans have doubled their walking trips in the past two decades and more than doubled their cycling.

And there is evidence, shocking for the baby boomer generation, that teenagers are not as enamored of driving as they used to be. In 1978, according to the Transportation Department, 75 percent of 17-year-olds were licensed to drive; by 2008 the figure had dropped to 49 percent.

Robert Puentes, a senior fellow in the Brookings Institution's metropolitan policy program, said this tracks with the notion that America is a vast and diverse place with differing transportation needs. The result, he said, is that the livable communities initiative needs to be somewhat ambiguous.

"It has to be vague in some respects, just given the wide variety of growth patterns that exist in this country," Puentes said. "There's a whole host of reasons why a federal kind of program that lays out one

How 'Livable' Is Your Community?

What exactly the Obama administration means by "livable community" in designing a new transportation policy is open to some — or a lot — of interpretation. Even administration officials have had some difficulty defining it.

At a hearing in March of the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee, the panel's ranking Republican, Christopher S. Bond of Missouri, asked Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood for his definition of livability — relating the elusiveness of the administration's descriptions to Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous observation on obscenity ("I know it when I see it").

"What it is, senator," LaHood testified, "it's an opportunity for people who want to live in neighborhoods, maybe they don't want a car — so they can walk to work. They can take mass transit to work. They can take a bus to work. They can go to a grocery store."

"I've got a lot of constituents," Bond replied, "for whom livability means having a decent highway. They've got to drive on a highway because they live in a rural area."

AARP, the lobbying organization for people age 50 and older, which has long engaged in transportation debates to protect options that are particularly useful for the elderly, once even drafted its own definition: "A livable community is one that has affordable and appropriate housing, supportive community features and services, and adequate mobility options."

"I usually say, when I'm talking to an audience, that it's an interesting term," said Elinor Ginzler, senior vice president for livable communities at AARP, which stresses housing affordability among the requirements of livability.

Ginzler said if you asked 30 people what a livable community is "you'd probably get 30 different answers."

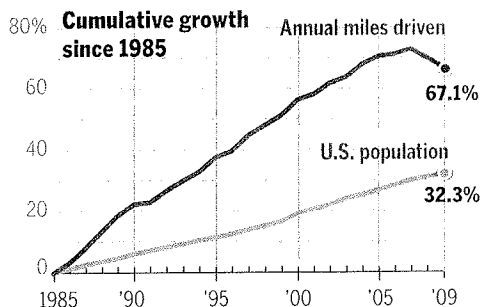
— KATHRYN A. WOLFE

Poticha said her husband, whom she called a "dyed-in-the-wool, single-occupancy-vehicle commuter," is a perfect example. She said they just moved into a new neighborhood near a transit stop, and he has started taking the train to work — not all the time, but about once a week, when he wants to. "That's how people try new things," Poticha said.

"I think that it's overblown, this whole notion that we're going to just rip cars out of peoples' garages," she said. "It's not going to happen. It's more about the information, it's

In the Driver's Seat

Not only do Americans own more cars than ever, but they drive them more, too. Until gas prices peaked in 2008, followed by the recession last year, the rate of increase in driving mileage each year far exceeded the pace of growth in the national population.



SOURCES: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Department of Transportation

particular path is just not appropriate."

In response to critics who say the government is attempting to mandate behavior, he added, "You can't say it's too vague and at the same time that the federal government is trying to dictate to people where they're going to live and how they're going to get around. It can't be both."

The real contention over Obama's plans will come after he lays out more details this

summer and the surface transportation bill begins to take shape. And the fight will be about money.

MONEY MATTERS

The administration has started putting some cash into transportation alternatives: Following \$1.5 billion in competitive stimulus grants last year called the TIGER program (for Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery), LaHood's office in May announced TIGER II, a \$600 million round of grants with a premium on "improving the quality of living and working environments of communities through increased transportation choices and connections," among other factors.

Additionally, HUD will be given \$40 million for competitive land-use grants, which can be awarded jointly in coordination with the DOT's projects.

The modest grant program, the Transportation Department announced grandly, will "help American families in all communities — rural, suburban and urban — gain better access to affordable housing, more transportation options, lower transportation costs and a cleaner environment."

Although the original grants were primarily to generate jobs, according to the advocacy group America Bikes, almost half of the 51 projects funded by TIGER grants had a biking or pedestrian component.

Additionally, Obama's fiscal 2011 budget requests \$150 million in sustainable communities planning grants for HUD and \$10 mil-



KING ROAD: Highway projects like this one in Chicago dwarf other modes of transportation; lawmakers such as Sen. Patty Murray warn against shifting road money to 'livability' initiatives.



lion to fund technical assistance from EPA. It would also allocate \$527 million to create a livable communities program inside DOT, which would promote state and local planning and development of housing and transportation options. Of that sum, \$307 million in transit funding would be dedicated to planning and project development and \$20 million would go to create a new Office of Livable Communities.

Most contentious, though, it would allocate \$200 million to create a competitive grant program for livable communities, taking that money out the Highway Trust Fund.

The notion of shifting money from one transportation mode to another does not sit well with traditional transportation groups — in particular the roadbuilding lobby. Deery, of the Associated General Contractors, said it would be a "major shift in focus within DOT away from transportation generally."

The Highway Trust Fund is funded largely by a tax on motor fuels, and, with few exceptions, most of the money has gone for road and bridge maintenance and construction.

Even the mass transit community, which gets its federal subsidy from the Trust Fund — between 12 percent and 16 percent of gasoline and diesel tax revenue goes to transit — is

not entirely happy with the proposed transfer of funds.

William Millar, president of the American Public Transportation Association, said his organization supports livability principles and is pleased overall with the positions the policy takes, but it does not support a "rob Peter to pay Paul situation."

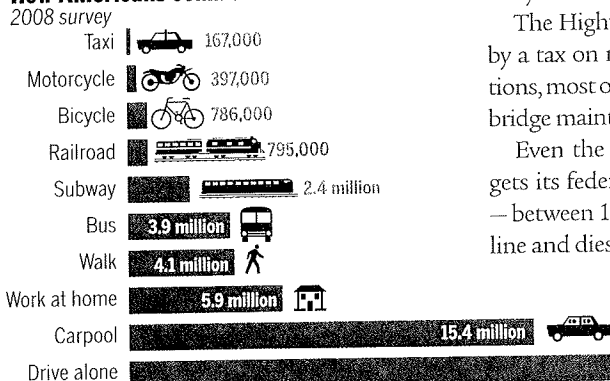
"The general idea of livability and working these policies in conjunction with climate change and other things — that makes sense to us as long as we don't forget the basic transportation needs of the country," Millar said. "We don't want to see any money taken from that. We're not spending enough."

Millar added that the right place to make these kinds of policy and funding decisions is within the context of a surface transportation reauthorization, not as part of the annual ap-

Freewheeling to Work

Rush hour is still a car show for the vast majority of American commuters, 76 percent of whom drive to the office all by themselves. Twice as many people walk to work as ride the subways; bikes carry barely half of 1 percent.

How Americans commute to work



SOURCE: Census Bureau

propriations process.

"And, oh, by the way," he added, "we need additional money to make this stuff happen."

The idea of tapping the trust fund is especially problematic now because the account already cannot keep pace with authorized spending.

Motor fuel taxes have not been increased since 1993 and are not indexed to inflation. Revenue has been down during the recession because people have bought less motor fuel, and as vehicle fleets have become more fuel efficient, revenue will continue to lag unless Congress raises fuel taxes or finds a new source of revenue.

Raising taxes, especially in an election year, is nearly impossible.

Even some Democrats who generally support the administration's initiative are concerned about using the trust fund to pay for it. Washington Democrat Patty Murray, who controls the purse strings for transportation spending on the Senate Appropriations Committee, said during a May 6 hearing that she has "very serious concerns" about shifting money from the trust fund.

"This is a significant investment, and the budget materials provide few details on how these resources would be used," Murray added.

DIFFERENT PRIORITIES

State transportation departments have their own qualms about shifting funding priorities. Many have suggested that they would prefer to spend money first on clearing the enormous backlog of maintenance for their core transportation assets, such as highways and bridges.





During a conference call to promote a new report highlighting how roads can be part of a livability program, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, or AASHTO, said that until a new surface transportation bill with more federal investment can be completed, states will continue to give a higher priority to such projects as repairing bridges rather than building bike lanes, which are traditionally considered "transportation enhancements."

"They're going to focus money on their highest priorities," said John Horsley, the association's executive director, citing "basic mobility, basic system preservation and adding the capacity the country needs to stay

Getting Around Is a Local Kind of Choice

Cities develop commuting habits based on geography, culture and economics. The West and South like to drive; big cities rely on transit; and foot power is most popular on the coasts.

Among urban areas with 250,000 or more commuters, the 2008 leaders in:

 Driving	89.9% (U.S. average)
Oklahoma City	96.6
Birmingham, Ala.	96.4
Omaha, Neb.	95.7
Tulsa, Okla.	95.6
Memphis, Tenn.	95.5
 Public transit	5.2%
New York	32.5
San Francisco	17.4
Washington	16.8
Boston	13.3
Chicago	13.1
 Biking	0.6%
Portland, Ore.	2.5
San Francisco	2.1
Tucson, Ariz.	1.5
Albuquerque, N.M.	1.5
San Jose, Calif.	1.4
 Walking	2.9%
New York	6.6
Boston	5.5
San Francisco	5.3
Honolulu	5.2
Albany, N.Y.	4.5

SOURCE: Census Bureau

competitive." Horsley also said the association wants to ensure that Congress will balance "bicycle and walking improvements, transit improvements" with "the terrific potential of road-related investments."

AASHTO's report noted that defining a "livable" community as one that encourages alternatives to autos "really doesn't work for the millions of Americans who have chosen the lifestyle that an automobile affords."

In addition to concerns about transit and

the environment, the group said, such a policy must address "soccer moms and family vacationers at the Grand Canyon."

Transportation Department officials are quick to say they have no plans to stop paying for highways and that roads are an essential part of livable development.

"We know that roads don't just move cars, they move buses, streetcars, bikers and pedestrians," said DOT spokeswoman Olivia Alair. "Road projects developed to serve all users and in conjunction with housing, economic development, land use and other infrastructure investments are among the various strategies we hope to encourage through our livability initiative."

Some metropolitan planning organizations continue to worry, though, that the new initiatives could be advance elements of an effort to tell them how to plan their own communities — although the administration insists its policies would do no such thing.

Lon Wyrick, executive director of the regional planning council for Olympia, Wash., said the initiatives "fit in well with the kinds of things we've tried to accomplish" in his region.

But as president of the Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations, Wyrick acknowledged that some other metropolitan planning organizations are concerned that the program could include directives in addition to incentives.

Poticha said the initiative is more carrot than stick, and that it is "absolutely not going to be involved" in mandating local land use decisions. Poticha called communities that participate in the program the "coalition of the willing."

"I don't know how to say it more clearly," she said. "We're going to give funding so that communities that are interested in updating their zoning codes can do that. Were not going to tell them how to do it or where to zone what. That's a local decision." ■

FOR FURTHER READING: *Surface transportation reauthorization (House draft, S 1496, S 1498, S 1533), CQ Weekly, pp. 1443, 56; car safety regulation (HR 5381, S 3302), p. 1463; LaHood, p. 466; Obama's fiscal 2011 budget, p. 339; bicycle lobby, 2008 CQ Weekly, p. 1685.*

108.8 million

