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Repairing America's infrastructure: the five keys

BY **BARRY B. LEPATNER**,
PARTNER AND FOUNDER, **LEPATNER
AND ASSOCIATES, LLP**

America's infrastructure is crumbling around us. But with \$120 billion in stimulus money targeted toward infrastructure, the government had better look before it leaps.

Why? Because the construction industry—plagued by wastefulness and inefficiency—is just as broken as the infrastructure it's charged with repairing.

When government pumps money into broken industries -- such as the financial services or automotive sectors -- with no strings attached, we have seen how billions can be wasted.

So, when giving money to an industry documented to waste upwards of \$120 billion a year without taking steps to ensure it's used wisely, you will again wind up with no ROI.

By taking steps now to overhaul the way the construction industry does business, we can start making improvements that will benefit Americans for generations to come.

Our approach should include these solutions:

Enact reforms that will avoid another Big Dig. Boston's Big Dig is the most expensive highway project ever.

Its original 1985 budget was just over \$2 billion. The real cost will reach \$22 billion.

The Big Dig epitomizes everything wrong with a construction industry rife with cost overruns and delays. With funds limited, we cannot afford cost overruns of 20%, 30% or more. We lack money to finish projects that face contractor overruns due to inefficiency. The industry must be reformed before we can make serious progress in repairing our infrastructure.

Construction is the nation's most inefficient industry. Average projects waste up to 50 percent of total labor cost. Fixed-priced contracts would save billions. With the huge numbers of projects that must be completed to restore America's infrastructure, we can't afford an additional hundred billion to fund poor job performance.

Reform must include better contracts that 1) are based on 100 percent complete architectural and engineering drawings and specifications, 2) include fixed prices for everything designed and approved by the jurisdiction, and 3) fairly apportion all risks expected during construction among all parties.

Create a national clearinghouse and database, accessible to every state transportation agency and the general public. The database would identify all

infrastructure-related design and construction issues. A similar database would require the federal government to alert state transportation departments of any bridge failure nationwide and include methodologies for remedial design, as well as maintenance alerts for America's 600,000 bridges.

With this information readily available to the public, we will enable state transportation engineers to take preventive action more quickly, help the public avoid unsafe bridges, and put politicians and officials on notice that they will be held accountable. Evidence has shown that making infrastructure problems public can lead to protective measures.

State governments should expand efforts to inform and protect citizens. One in four U.S. bridges is either "structurally deficient" or "functionally obsolete." State governments must do more to inform their citizens—through hearings, press conferences, or news releases—about structural deficiencies. States should develop remedial game plans within six months of a bridge's designation as "structurally deficient." They should issue annual remediation progress reports and be alerted if repair funds are not provided within 18 months.

Take action to address the shortage of civil and structural engineers. These professionals are trained in advanced inspection methodologies and are experts in bridge remediation. But the lack of engineering specialists within state transportation departments—positions systematically downsized due to decreased funding—prevents adequate inspections that will properly assess safety.

State transportation departments must increase compensation to hire and retain

engineers to stem their exodus to private industry. Reducing long-term maintenance costs rests with these engineers' valued experience.

Invest in technologies that save money and improve accuracy. By the time cracks appear, bridge remediation costs have skyrocketed. Today's inspections often fail to detect cracks until they are visible to the human eye. The Federal Highway Administration acknowledges that visual inspections are subjective and not totally reliable in detecting cracks before they become visible.

Technology exists to anticipate bridge remediation years before rust, corrosion, and crack appear. States need the funds to purchase this equipment and train inspectors to use it. Precision and objectivity will catch problems earlier, and save countless millions of dollars.

The financial crisis has forced us intently scrutinize our priorities. Repairing the economy should come first. Thankfully, the Obama Administration has made infrastructure repair a priority as well. After all, the two are connected. We cannot prosper without a safe infrastructure for citizens and businesses.

But considering the number of projects that must be completed to restore America's infrastructure, measures must be taken to ensure that money allocated for infrastructure projects is used wisely.

Government must ensure that infrastructure projects are all undertaken with true fixed-price contracts that pass the risk for poor performance onto contractors who fail to complete on time and on budget. Our leaders' credibility -- plus our nation's safety and viability -- depend on it.