

Chicago Tribune

Illinois planning for 'yesterday's transportation system,' IDOT chief warns

By Jon Hilkevitch | September 3, 2015



Workers from the Illinois Department of Transportation, installing roadblocks for the eastbound Kennedy Expressway to Congress Parkway closure on Aug. 20, 2015. (Nuccio DiNuzzo, Chicago Tribune)

Illinois' transportation system is focused on the past, IDOT chief says.

The state's transportation chief on Wednesday delivered a tough assessment of his agency's ability to solve problems ranging from traffic congestion to the sluggish movement of freight across Illinois, saying, "I'm afraid that we're planning for yesterday's transportation system."

Randy Blankenhorn, a veteran transportation expert who has been secretary of the Illinois Department of Transportation for seven months, provided numerous examples during a speech in downtown Chicago about how IDOT has suffered from tunnel vision that obsessed over the condition of state roads and bridges but failed to focus on the big picture of moving people and goods more efficiently.

"Do we continue to build overhead message signs (on expressways) that tell me how late I am, or do we do a better job of getting the right information (to the public)?" he said.

He said government officials need to follow the lead of private-sector innovators and technology companies and "think about transportation in a completely new and different way." A stronger public-private partnership is the key, he said.



"IDOT is not going to come up with the solution. It is going to be you," Blankenhorn told a City Club of Chicago audience, consisting mostly of professionals in the transportation industry.

During a statewide "listening tour" earlier this year aimed at generating public input on specific transportation problems and possible solutions, Blankenhorn said he heard from a company executive who said he basically uses highways and intermodal truck-to-train facilities as warehouses because freight traffic moves so slowly.

And he was told about 4-year-old kids who spend an hour on the bus each way going to and from their preschool.

"That's a transportation system that is not working," said Blankenhorn, who was executive director of the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning since its inception in 2006 until January, when Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner appointed him to head IDOT. Blankenhorn worked at IDOT from 1984-2006 in planning and policy roles.

"We haven't thought broadly enough as an agency. ... It's not about this highway or that bus or that transit line or that waterway. It's about what are we doing to make sure the system works every day for people who are moving goods, for the public and the strength of our communities," he said.

"We have cars that communicate with each other. Cars that share information through the cloud (computing and data storage). This is the future that we are not used to in the transportation industry, and we certainly are not used to at the Illinois Department of Transportation," Blankenhorn said.

"I want to stop talking and start doing," he said, but he also acknowledged very little progress is likely until Rauner and the Democrats who control the General Assembly end a political impasse that has delayed passage of a state budget. Once an operating budget is approved, Rauner told IDOT that he supports spending "billions of dollars" on transportation projects, Blankenhorn said.

Blankenhorn was asked by a member of the audience whether he supports creation of high-occupancy vehicle lanes on Chicago-area expressways. HOV lanes, long common in many large

urban areas, are restricted for use during peak travel hours by drivers carrying at least one passenger.

"HOV lanes are not where the future lies," the IDOT secretary responded. Instead, he advocated implementation of express toll lanes, perhaps starting on the Eisenhower (I-290) or Stevenson (I-55) expressways if new lanes were added to those highways.

Under the express toll lane concept, the amount of the toll would vary depending on the time of day and traffic congestion. Drivers would have the option of paying to use the tolled express lanes or staying on the regular lanes where the number of vehicles and the travel times presumably would be higher.