

LaHood says DOT ending favoring motorized transportation over non-motorized



Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood climbed atop a desk in a Senate hearing room last week to address the National Bikers Summit. (National Bikers Summit photo)

By LYNDON FINNEY
The Trucker Staff

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WASHINGTON — Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood has announced a “sea change,” but it has nothing to do with water.

Rather, LaHood, apparently buoyed on by a rousing reception he received during the National Bikers

Association meeting here March 11, today said that people across America who value bicycling should have a voice when it comes to transportation planning.

LaHood’s surprise appearance at the bikers summit and his subsequent remarks drew praise from those in attendance, who reportedly swarmed the secretary “like a rock star” when he tried to leave.

To make sure he could be seen, LaHood hopped up on a desk in the Senate hearing room where the group was meeting.

According to the Web site bikeportland.org, LaHood told those gathered:

“What an effort a year makes huh? All of the work all of you have been doing for so long has paid huge huge dividends. People get it. People want to live in livable communities. People want streetcars that are made in Portland, Ore. People want walking paths, biking paths, and opportunities for families to really do the things they do best — which is to hang together and have fun... And you all created an opportunity for America with all of your hard work.

“I really came here just to say thank you to all of you for hanging in there with us. You all have made a big difference. Our whole livable community program ... The President has included money in his next year’s budget for it; we’re collaborating with HUD, we’re going to put affordable housing next to walking paths and biking paths

“I’ve been all over America, and where I’ve been in America I’ve been very proud to talk about the fact that people do want alternatives. They want out of their cars; they want out of congestion; they want to live in livable neighborhoods. And we would not be where we’re at today without you I’m very, very grateful!”

“This is the end of favoring motorized transportation at the expense of non-motorized,” LaHood continued on his daily blog on the DOT Web site. “We are integrating the needs of bicyclists in federally-funded road projects. We are discouraging transportation investments that negatively affect cyclists and pedestrians. And we are encouraging investments that go beyond the

minimum requirements and provide facilities for bicyclists and pedestrians of all ages and abilities.”

“Secretary LaHood believes the way we design our communities has a huge impact on our citizens’ economic, physical and social wellbeing,” a DOT spokesman said when asked if LaHood’s new directive meant that much-needed highway infrastructure needs might be sidetracked in favor of bike paths. “Many Americans live in neighborhoods without access to public transportation or sidewalks. By focusing on livability, we can help transform the way transportation serves the American people, and create safer, healthier communities that provide access to economic opportunities.”

The spokesman noted that LaHood presently is presiding over the “most ambitious infrastructure investment program in more than half a century, the Economic Recovery Act.”

So far, the spokesman said, the DOT has obligated \$37.8 billion for 14,011 highway, road, transit, bridge and airport construction projects in 53 U.S. states and territories.

“Secretary LaHood has always said that rebuilding the nation’s infrastructure and the job creation that comes with that are among his primary goals,” the spokesman said.

To set the new approach in motion, LaHood said the DOT had formulated key recommendations for state DOTs and communities:

- Treat walking and bicycling as equals with other transportation modes
- Ensure convenient access for people of all ages and abilities
- Go beyond minimum design standards
- Collect data on walking and biking trips
- Set a mode share target for walking and bicycling
- Protect sidewalks and shared-use paths the same way roadways are protected (for example, snow removal), and
- Improve non-motorized facilities during maintenance projects.

“Now, this is a start, but it's an important start,” LaHood said. “These initial steps forward will help us move forward even further.”

“Livability” has become a quality of life priority for the Obama administration, but in recent hours, two House Republicans have criticized the DOT for moving forward with the effort to link transportation planning and land use without first figuring out a way to solve the ongoing road and transit funding crises, according to the *Environment and Energy Daily*.

“There is a lot of concern that there is no surface transportation authorization coming from DOT and that turns into irritation when you see those at the department proposing to skim off highway dollars — dollars that come from the bankrupt Highway Trust Fund — and take those dollars from cities and states to fund a boutique program,” said Rep. Tom Latham, R-Iowa, the top Republican on the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development Appropriations Subcommittee, was quoted as saying.

The livability issue touched off an exchange between LaHood and Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo., when LaHood appeared before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to discuss the new transportation bill.

“What’s livability?” Bond asked LaHood.

“Communities where people have access to many different forms of transportation and affordable housing and the ability to really have access to all of the things that are important to them, whether it’s a grocery store, drug store access. ... These are communities and neighborhoods where people want to live where they have access to all the things that they want,” the secretary responded.

Bond argued livability issues would focus on cities, at the expense of rural areas and pondered whether it was the federal government’s responsibility to build such livability features as sidewalks.

"I've got a lot of constituents for whom livability means having a decent highway," Bond said. "They've got to drive between one town and another town."