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news

Members Deliver ASCE's Report Card On Infrastructure to Congress

By Mark Fitzgerald

March 9 was a blustery, frigid day on Capitol Hill, but that didn't stop more than 100 ASCE members from making their way through lengthy security checks and into the Rayburn House Office Building. After all, the nation's infrastructure was at stake. The Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (TEA-LU)—a bill (HR. 3) that would reauthorize funding for the nation's surface transportation systems by providing \$284 billion for highways, mass transit, and safety programs—was just hours away from a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives, and at precisely 10:30 AM ASCE's *2005 Report Card for America's Infrastructure* was to be officially released in downtown Washington at the National Press Club.

With training tips in lobbying fresh in their minds, members from 40 states were prepared to encourage their senators and representatives to support legislation aimed at bolstering America's aging infrastructure. "We have a lot of work to do," said Representative Sue Kelly (R-New York), the sponsor of the Dam Rehabilitation and Repair Act of 2005, at a breakfast meeting that morning. "You're here from all over the country. You are our constituents. You mean something to the people you are talking to. I'm challenging you all to get out there and nag, nag, nag, because infrastructure is the way that we are able to keep our country together."

Armed with copies of the report that ASCE was then releasing at the National Press Club—which details the deplorable state of the nation's infrastructure, assigning it an overall grade of D—as well as key facts and statistics about infrastructure in their states, members were primed to advocate such legislative initiatives as TEA-LU; qualifications-based selection (QB5) of architects, engineers, and land surveyors—a

nondiscriminatory procedure that ensures the selection of the best-qualified engineering and architecture firms while enabling large and small firms to compete on an equal footing; and the Dam Rehabilitation and Repair Act of 2005 (H.R. 1105), a bill that would provide \$350 million over four years for the repair, rehabilitation, or removal of publicly owned dams.

“We have over ten thousand high-hazard dams in the United States, and more than three thousand five hundred of these have been deemed unsafe,” said Kelly at the breakfast meeting. “If these dams fail, hundreds of lives, homes, [and] businesses will be lost. I have a bill that would take care of the faulty dams and rehabilitate them. My bill provides the investment necessary to renovate the dams that are at risk.”

Later that morning, in room 2229 of the Rayburn House Office Building, David L. Westerling, Ph.D., P.E., a civil engineering professor at Merrimack College and a member of the council that oversaw the preparation of the *2005 Report Card for America's Infrastructure*, met with Ronald Canton, a staff aide of Representative Martin Meehan (D–Massachusetts). A former ASCE congressional fellow and a former president of ASCE's Boston Society of Civil Engineers Section, Westerling calmly began discussing the deplorable condition of his state's infrastructure situation, pointing out that according to the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), 71 percent of the state's major roads were in poor or mediocre condition and 51 percent of its bridges were structurally deficient or functionally obsolete

“I'm offering this information as ammunition, so that Marty can use it to plead a case,” said Westerling to Carlton, who listened intently. Brandishing his copy of ASCE's “report card,” Westerling cited the decline in the condition of U.S. roads, which went from a grade of D⁺ in 2001 to a D, and the poor condition of the nation's dams, which also received a D. “In certain areas of Massachusetts, people would have nowhere to go if any of these high-hazard dams were to fail,” added Westerling, who went on to mention that Kelly was looking for cosponsors for her bill on dam rehabilitation and repair. “This is a good time for Marty to get behind this bill, before something breaks down, because if he waits, it's just going to cost more later.”

Emphasizing the merits of QBS, Westerling explained ASCE's position that the cost of engineering services should be of secondary importance to professional qualifications. Carlton concurred: “If you're not going to go with the lowest bid for a doctor, you shouldn't go with the lowest bid for critical infrastructure.” Carlton later commended ASCE for its infrastructure report and promised to convey the details of the meeting to Meehan.

At a luncheon that day sponsored by ASCE and the American Public Works Association for engineers and congressional staff members, Donald L. Plusquellic, the president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the mayor of Akron, Ohio, spoke about the importance and cogency of ASCE's infrastructure report and the need for sound leadership in confronting the realities of the nation's crumbling infrastructure. “The older

I get, the more and more demoralized I am about what we're leaving our kids and grandkids," said Plusquellic. "If we want a certain quality of drinking water—so we know our kids aren't drinking something that's going to give them cancer—if we want our bridges to be safe so our kids can go over them in school buses without worrying about them collapsing, then it's vitally important that we deal with the issue of resources and how we allocate resources to support what you are pointing out here today."

Plusquellic went on to support the idea of writing a letter to Congress and the administration to request that a commission be set up to make recommendations on how to generate funding and apportion the financial burden equitably to improve infrastructure. "Whether it's user fees, additional taxes, or other combinations of ways to pay for this, I think a commission is an excellent idea," he said. "On behalf of the Conference of Mayors, we'll stand ready to join with you, and I think we can get some other partners too."

While Plusquellic also raised the question of whether or not the nation had sufficient political will to commit the resources necessary for infrastructure renovation, ASCE's president, William P. Henry, P.E., noted that the Society's efforts to heighten awareness about the state of U.S. infrastructure were strictly of a nonpartisan nature. "We are the factual, logical, thorough specialists who, in an orderly way, have given people something to work with," said Henry at the close of the luncheon. "Can [the infrastructure report] be better? Of course. Someone suggested that perhaps we ought to consider adding public hospitals the next time. That's something that we'll take a look at. We added rail this time, we added public parks and recreation, and we added security. The report is not fixed; it should be a dynamic instrument that reflects what public facilities we rely on and what kind of shape they're in."

At 2:30 PM, in room 331 of the Hart Senate Office Building, ASCE members Brigid A. Baty and Edgar G. Dymally, both with the Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, in Los Angeles, met with Rachel Miller, a staff aide for Senator Dianne Feinstein (D-California). Baty, a facility planner, and Dymally, an environmental specialist, stressed the importance of Feinstein's support for TEA-LU, acknowledging that the Senate had not yet introduced its version of reauthorization legislation. "Seventy-one percent of California's major roads are in poor or mediocre condition," said Dymally, citing figures from the FEWA. "And sixty percent of California's major urban roads are congested," seconded Baty.

It's also worth noting that, according to the FHWA, 28 percent of the state's bridges are functionally obsolete or deficient. On April 23, 2004, a piece of the Richmond–San Rafael Bridge fell into San Francisco Bay, creating a 0.9 m diameter hole in the trestle. "The span has been bedeviled by holes in recent years," the *Marin Independent Journal* reported. "Opened in 1956," the paper noted, "the decks on the span have never been replaced and are showing signs of age."

After taking careful notes of the issues raised, Miller remarked that Feinstein was especially interested in water and energy infrastructure. “We need to implement alternative sources of energy,” Miller said. “Whether it’s through wind, geothermal power, natural gas, solar heat, or anything else we can use effectively, California needs it.” Moreover, the point was made that more than 840 million L of drinking water are lost each day because of leaking pipes. The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that \$17.5 billion will be needed over the next 20 years if the quality of the state’s drinking water is to improve.

At the end of the day, members of congress and their staffers joined the ASCE and NSPE representatives at a reception in the Rayburn building, an additional opportunity to discuss matters pertaining to infrastructure. Several key House members attended, including Vernon Ehlers (R–Michigan), the chairman of the Committee on Science’s Subcommittee on Environment, Technology and Standards, and Toni Petri (R-Wisconsin), the chairman of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure’s Subcommittee on Highways, Transit, and Pipelines.

The momentous day saw more than 120 representatives of ASCE and NSPE pay visits to more than 150 congressional offices. In those visits information about dams and the nation’s surface transportation systems was shared with our nation’s elected leaders, and the salient points of the *2005 Report Card for America’s Infrastructure* were brought home to them. On the following day, March 10, the House overwhelmingly passed TEA-LU.