



Column: America's infrastructure dreams need raw materials

By Tom Madison, Published December 26, 2017

America's infrastructure is in crisis. The American Society of Civil Engineers graded the health of our nation's infrastructure with a D+ in a report issued earlier this year. The ASCE report card calls for more than \$4.5 trillion in investment over the next decade to address the challenges facing our roads, bridges, airports, railways, ports, pipelines, levees, dams, energy grid and the other systems and assets that underpin our economy and quality of life.

If we're serious about returning American infrastructure to its rightful place as a source of pride and leadership, we will need better, faster access to the raw materials it takes to sustain and improve our systems.

Rebuilding our aging, complex infrastructure assets and preparing them to meet growing demand will take a tremendous volume and variety of raw materials. These structures and systems are built with steel, concrete and numerous other metals. Take the nearly completed Tappan Zee Bridge replacement north of New York City, a \$3.9 billion project I helped lead as executive director of the New York State Thruway Authority. Building this new bridge requires at least 100,000 tons or 220 million pounds of U.S. steel; the Empire State Building used 57,000 tons. During the past six decades, construction of our National Highway System has required more than 6 billion tons of steel.

Replacing and repairing our infrastructure provides an extraordinary opportunity to invest in and grow our economy, but it will be a missed opportunity if we are forced to rely on imported iron ore, aluminum or copper from China to get the job done.

The Trump Administration has signaled its intention to implement a \$1 trillion infrastructure investment plan, and this historically non-partisan policy area might be one of the best places to find agreement right now in Washington. America is blessed with the vast natural resources we need to meet the demand for the raw materials such a massive infrastructure program would require. But in order to ramp up production of the minerals, metals and materials these projects will require, we must break free from the regulatory straitjacket on our mining industry.

Our redundant, inefficient outdated mine permitting process is the place to start. The natural bounty of mineral resources that lies just below our feet is practically inaccessible without a serious overhaul of our inefficient mine permitting process. The frustrations and delays associated with opening a new mine in the U.S., or expanding existing facilities, simply defies logic.

Securing the necessary approvals to open a new domestic mine can take as many as seven to 10 years, and often even longer. Until recently, this timeframe was consistent with the average time it took to permit a major transportation infrastructure project in the U.S. Recent reforms improved focus and coordination among federal and state regulating agencies and have dramatically reduced this time frame. For example, the new Tappan Zee secured its environmental permits and approvals in just 11

months, rather than the typical six to seven years.

After all, it took less than five years to build the Hoover Dam, with its 4.35 million cubic yards of concrete and 140 million pounds of steel. Obtaining the necessary mining permits that enable such extraordinary feats of engineering should not take twice as long.

Environmental protection is critically important, but using it as justification for our drawn-out permitting process is a red herring. In Canada and Australia, where environmental safeguards are comparable to our own, permitting a mine takes just two to three years. We can ensure thorough environmental study and protection while bringing commonsense reforms to our outdated mine permitting process; the two are not mutually exclusive.

The United States has an estimated \$6.2 trillion in mineral reserves, yet we currently import nearly \$7 billion in minerals and metals each year. The U.S. Geological Survey's 2017 Mineral Commodity Summary found we are now import-dependent on fully half of the 50 key mineral commodities. This wasn't always so. An increasingly antagonistic atmosphere for our mining industry has driven investments and jobs out of our country and into places where it's welcomed. This growing dependence on mining imports comes at a time of growing instability in many mineral rich areas of the world. We have the resources right here in America. This is an economic vulnerability of our own making and it can be addressed immediately with responsible mine permitting reforms. America's infrastructure and economy are depending on it.

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