

Transportation, tourism emphasized in 'Western' highways measure

By Sen. CONRAD BURNS

THIS MONTH I JOINED Sen. Max Baucus in introducing the Transportation Improvement Act of 1991.

During the 102nd Congress, funding the national highway program will be an issue debated at length, and our bill represents an effort by those of us from large western states to make sure that we get a fair shake during this process.

We've got to make sure that I-15, Route 200, Highway 89 and Highway 87 are well-maintained; that roadways to and through tourist attractions in the Great Falls area, such as Showdown ski area, Fort Benton and the proposed Lewis and Clark Interpretive Center are in good shape; and that public lands are easy to get to.

I want to talk a little bit about how the transportation bill fits into an overall strategy to restructure our western economies in order to meet the challenges of the 1990s. This strategy is based on what I call the three "Ts" — transportation, tourism and telecommunications.

The American economy is moving full steam ahead into the information age — a time during which our economy will become more service and information-oriented. This information revolution will also transform our markets into a global economy. We are already seeing the effects of this transformation with the proliferation of information-related jobs.

I truly believe that rural America is uniquely positioned to take advantage of this changing economy. Rural areas can once again prosper in an American economy which is more decentralized because we

can communicate and coordinate the movement of commerce from more remote areas.

I am working in a separate vein to ensure that rural America gets to participate in the Information Revolution. My work as a member of the Commerce Committee's Communications Subcommittee is focused on creating a competitive environment to spur the deployment of fiber optic cable. Fiber optic networks will be the information highways of the future, and rural America must have these highways.

The Transportation Improvement Act of 1991 focuses on the other aspects of the three "Ts" strategy — transportation and tourism. This legislation includes a bill I introduced earlier this session to improve our tourism infrastructure, S. 540, the Federal Rural Tourism and Recreational Development Act of 1991.

It is important to remember that a healthy tourism industry depends on an adequate highway system. We can market the unique qualities of the West all we want, but if we don't provide the means for people to get there, they won't come. This legislation increases funding levels for the federal lands category within the highway program and authorizes the use of these funds for road improvements and other infrastructure-related purposes.

IN SHORT, WE ARE committing more of this nation's highway resources to an infrastructure that supports tourism on and around federal lands.

Federal lands in western states have played, and will continue to play, a key role in establishing a sustainable tourism industry which

is an integral part of the new economic base for rural communities.

Finally, and most importantly, this legislation put forth a plan to revitalize the transportation infrastructure that this country relies most heavily on — our highways.

This legislation provides most states with increased funding levels to meet the demands of a deteriorating transportation infrastructure. Research by David Alan Aschauer with the Chicago Federal Reserve Bank and other economists have linked our nation's lack of commitment to an adequate infrastructure to the "decline in profit rates on private capital, savings and sluggish productivity growth."

THIS BILL FULFILLS Congress's responsibility to provide for a highway infrastructure that can sustain economic growth. This bill also provides states with the utmost flexibility so that they can direct the funds to the areas of greatest need.

We must work to improve our farm-to-market roads so that we can continue to export our goods to other parts of this country and to our foreign trading partners. The same is true for the roads that support other traditional Montana industries such as timbering and mining. We must also continue to develop opportunities for rural economies to compete in the global economy.

One example of this type of project is the Northern Express Transportation Authority (NETA) in Shelby.

This inland Port Authority is strategically located at the juncture of two interstate highways and two rail lines. They act as a shipper

base for the movement of commerce through Montana and to support commerce and trade between Montana and Canada. New economic opportunities like NETA can be pursued by rural states under the flexible funding provisions in this bill.

Our bill also rejects outright a couple of proposals which would do great harm to most western states.

These include the elimination of the 85 percent minimum allocation, the reduction of the federal commitment to our highway needs and a limited National Highway System.

What urban areas tend to overlook is the fact that the goods they receive come from and move through rural areas. In fact, 75 percent of the Interstate mileage lays in areas with fewer than 5,000 people.

My objection to the National Highway System does not revolve around the concept, it revolves around the size of this system.

MONTANA IS THE fourth largest state and is approximately the size of Michigan, Illinois and Indiana combined. The Administration's proposed National Highway System left an area the size of the entire state of Indiana without a single designated route. It also fails to serve half of our custom points with Canada. This is clearly unacceptable.

There is only one point on which I will not compromise as we stand at this crossroads — and that is my commitment to see that rural America is equipped with the tools it needs to prosper in the new economic environment.