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Opinion: Investment's key to Ga.'s economic mobility

[Opinion](#) | By Sam Gude

A responsive solution that expands current investment strategies and creates a long-term, dedicated stream of investment for multimodal projects of statewide impact will allow Georgia to continue as the No. 1 state in which to do business.

Over the last decade, Georgia has experienced remarkable progress in developing our transportation and infrastructure network. We stabilized our roads and bridges in 2015 with HB170, regional transit systems in 2018, and invested over \$300 million in state money in the Savannah Harbor Expansion Project. Since 2012, over 70 communities have passed local option sales taxes for infrastructure.

Fortunately, Georgians recognize that strong political leadership on transportation issues is a critical component of our economic success. Some 93% of Georgians use automobiles as their primary source of transportation and 43% believe that our road network is our greatest asset. And 49% believe the state has primary responsibility for transportation infrastructure investment, and 51% are more likely to re-elect a politician who votes to increase transportation funding. Transportation builds communities, and Georgians recognize that.



So, it should come as no surprise that Georgia is uniquely positioned to become the transportation hub of the Southeast, if not the entire United States. With port traffic exploding to 8 million containers a year in 2028 from 4 million today; our population growing by

over a million and car fleet by 1.5 million, and flights at Hartsfield will grow from 980k each year to 1.14 million. We already have the largest rail network in the South, the 4th-largest port, the 12th-largest air cargo hub, and the 5th-largest logistics employer in the U.S.



Even so, our freight network is unprepared for the coming load. Of that growth at the port, the vast majority (80%-plus) will travel by truck. Not all of that freight actually has to stay in Georgia. In fact, GDOT estimates that roughly one-third of that traffic is going somewhere else.

And Georgia still has economic challenges. The Georgia Center for Opportunity recently noted that there are 250,000 working-age men not working or looking for work in Georgia. By 2027, 87 Georgia counties will have lost jobs and, by 2030, 74 counties will see population loss.

There is still a significant gap between where our planning and funding are today and where it must be to protect our future economy and quality of life. Georgia is competing against other states, regions, cities, and even countries for the jobs required to sustain our future workforce. In 2014, Georgia had 1,600 deficient bridges. In 2019, Georgia still had over 1,550 deficient bridges. The American Road and Transportation Builders Association recently published that 15 other states have passed significant transportation funding packages since HB170 in 2015.

And our region is not impervious to that change. According to a recent report by [TRIP](#), 24 percent of county-maintained roads in the Atlanta region are in poor condition. Current funding will only allow for 14 percent of the miles of county-maintained roads in need of resurfacing and 10 percent of county-maintained roads in need of reconstruction to be addressed this year. In fact, the amount anticipated to be spent by Atlanta-area county governments in 2020 on highways and bridges is only 72 percent of the total amount needed. The TRIP report also found that 2.6 million motorists drive daily across some 150 locally and state-maintained bridges in the Atlanta region that are rated as deficient. According to the report, 2,134 people were killed in traffic crashes in the Atlanta area from 2014 to 2018, an average of 427 fatalities per year. The report noted that making cost-effective roadway safety improvements would help to improve traffic safety in the region.

Fortunately, the Georgia Commission on Freight and Logistics has risen to the challenge. Established in 2019 by our leaders at the State Capitol, this commission of business leaders and elected officials has been working hard to quantify Georgia's opportunities for growth in the freight and logistics industry and is expected to produce substantive policy recommendations by the end of this year. These recommendations will form the foundation of policy changes that can solidify Georgia's position as a global leader in freight and logistics. A responsive solution that expands current investment strategies and creates a long-term, dedicated stream of investment for multimodal projects of statewide impact will allow Georgia to continue as the No. 1 state in which to do business.

Infrastructure investment is one of the more underappreciated means of economic mobility in Georgia today but, elevated to its proper context, can fundamentally change the lives of thousands of people across our state. Fortunately, our state's leaders appear to be intent on doing just that.

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