

With Jeffrey N. Shane Undersecretary of transportation

Jeffrey N. Shane, undersecretary of transportation for policy, has held Department of Transportation posts during during this administration and those of presidents Reagan and George H.W. Bush. He also has practiced law in Washington. Shane is currently the principal policy adviser to Transportation Secretary Norman Mineta.

Q. What is SEA-21? Secretary Mineta first mentioned Sea-21 at his confirmation hearing nearly four years ago, but it has never seemed to coalesce.

A. SEA-21 is a collection of very specific proposals that the department is working through the administration's process. It is not merely an idea. There are a dozen solid elements to the program. It's being considered by the Office of Management and Budget, and some of our sister agencies. There are some elements that we can do without legislation, and we will move out more smartly on those. Others will require legislative and budgetary authority.

Q. Do you think it will go to Congress this year?

A. It would be quixotic to send any big, new idea to Congress before the next Congress. We're talking early next year.

Q. Renewing the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century is another thing that Congress has to deal with. How will a new TEA-21 benefit freight transportation?

A. We're attacking the issue of freight transportation with much more aggressiveness and purpose. I think it's significant that we're tackling it as a priority issue in the surface transportation reauthorization proposal. It's a harbinger for increased attention going forward.

Q. Has the DOT been successful in breaking down "stovepipes" between transportation modes?

A. I've seen significant movement in that direction. A year before the expiration of TEA-21, we pulled together an intermodal team from all the administrations. We broke it down into working groups to look at the various aspects of the reauthorization proposal. The administration's surface reauthorization bill looked dramatically different from anything we've seen before. For example, take intermodal connectors as a separate problem. There's nothing new about making intermodal connectors eligible for federal assistance. They have been eligible projects from the get-go. The problem is they've been getting pretty short shrift from state highway departments. We felt we needed a set-aside. Set-asides are not popular in this administration, but Secretary Mineta was persuaded that in this one case, we should make an exception to the rule.

Q. Is the DOT concerned with congestion in land corridors?

A. There's a huge concern. The amount of container traffic moving through the country is going to double by 2020, and maybe sooner than that. If we double the numbers of containers on the road, there's no way we're going to be able to accommodate that by pouring more lanes of highway.

Q. Is short-sea shipping part of the solution?

A. We're going to have to have a smarter system. We're going to have to go to forms of transportation that have not been exploited sufficiently in the past, not the least of which is short-sea shipping. That has the potential to take a lot of trucks off the highway. We're encouraging development in every way we can. We're hoping to see the marine transportation system play a far more significant role in some of that domestic intercity truck traffic.

Q. What about financing for maritime projects?

A. There are trust funds for ports: the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund and the Capital Construction Fund, which has been on the books for years. What we want to do in the context of any SEA-21 package is revisit the way those funds are being used.

Q. Will SEA-21 address the industry's complaints that the Harbor Maintenance Trust Fund is used too often to offset non-maritime government programs?

A. We're hearing those complaints. Hopefully, you'll see some measure of response to that point. The money's there for the maritime sector. We would agree that it's not being used as effectively for its intended purposes.

Q. Is there still time to do the things to prevent the gridlock that is predicted for 15 years from now?

A. Yes, because the government is addressing the issue squarely for the first time, and because we are hitting the wall in a way that's never been apparent before. The combination of the two encourages me that solutions are going to be available. So many people understand the connection between making our transportation system more effective, and our ability to grow the economy. The political wherewithal to deal with these problems has never been stronger.

— R.G. Edmonson

