

AARP Bulletin today

Living in a Post-Car World

By: [Christie Findlay](#) | Source: From the AARP Bulletin print edition | October 1, 2009

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Photo by Richard Cummins/Corbis

Battles over President

Obama's economic stimulus plan and health care ambitions underscore the difference between promising to bridge the capital's partisan divide and actually doing it. Apart from the fray stands [Ray LaHood](#), the sole registered Republican in Obama's Cabinet. In his first year as Transportation secretary, the former congressman and Obama's fellow Illinoisan has become a vocal advocate for his boss's priorities—from green transportation options like high-speed rail to the wildly popular Cash for Clunkers program.

LaHood, 63, has also emerged as one of the administration's most enthusiastic proponents of livable communities—places that offer ample housing and transportation options considerate of residents of all ages and the environment—even when fellow Republicans snipe at such notions. In September, LaHood scheduled an unusual national tour with [Lisa Jackson](#), administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, and [Shaun Donovan](#), secretary of Housing and Urban Development, to promote the idea of livable communities.

The timing couldn't be more critical. Congress gets the chance to reshape the way Americans get around just once every six years, when the [federal transportation bill](#) comes up for reauthorization. That bill, introduced by House Transportation Committee Chairman [James Oberstar](#), D-Minn., is on the table right now. For decades, despite oil crises and the green movement, alternative transportation, a tenet of livable communities, has seemed an afterthought to car-based policy. Though the administration stalled Oberstar's forward-looking bill by requesting an 18-month extension of the current act, LaHood remains Obama's point man for helping Congress shape a plan for the future.

To talk about his vision, Secretary LaHood recently met with the *AARP Bulletin* in his Washington office. The Department of Transportation headquarters are located in an emerging neighborhood that has subway and bus service, the Anacostia River waterfront, housing construction and many new amenities, including Nationals Park, a stadium for the city's baseball team.

Q. You talk a lot about livable communities. How would you describe one?

A. It's a community where if people don't want an automobile, they don't have to have one. A community where you can walk to work, your doctor's appointment, pharmacy or grocery store. Or you could take light rail, a bus or ride a bike.

Q. Do you have a favorite example?

A. I was just in [Hoboken, N.J.](#), over the weekend. My wife and I took the [Acela train](#) to Newark, and then went to our friends' condo in Hoboken. It's actually a very small town, and their whole main street has been fixed up with restaurants, grocery stores, anything you want. On Saturday we took a train to Manhattan—it took us 15 minutes to get there—and we walked all over, had dinner, took a train home and never saw our friends' car. On Sunday, we walked the riverfront. There were 50 or 60 people out there, walking with their children or jogging. [Give your town a ["Livable Communities Quiz."](#)]

Q. When you tour the country, what are people telling you they want changed in their communities?

A. People want alternative forms of transportation; they don't want to own two or

three cars. And they want green space, biking and walking paths, but they want the amenities, too—access to shopping, restaurants, health care.

Q. It's still a hard sell. For example, Sen. John McCain characterizes [spending on a bridge for pedestrians and bikes instead of on roads](#) as a waste of taxpayers' money.

A. Well, there are a lot of other forward-thinking people in Congress. They care about where people are going to live, and how they will live. Look, we built the interstate system. That's done. Now we're trying other things so you don't have to get in a car every time you want to go somewhere.

Q. How are we going to afford all of this during a recession?

A. Well, I don't know that these things cost much money. It doesn't cost an enormous amount to turn an old rail line into a walking path or to transform a riverfront into an area where people can walk.

Q. Did you seek to delay the new transportation reauthorization to buy time so you can find the money for these new programs?

A. That's exactly why we did it. Everybody wants to spend \$400 billion or \$500 billion on a new bill. James Oberstar's bill costs \$450 billion. There's just no way we're going to find that money now. Eighteen months gives us the opportunity to help the economy get a little better so we can pass a very comprehensive bill.

Q: How do you see the bill benefiting older Americans?

A: A lot of our seniors want to live in smaller towns where they grew up, raised children and feel safe. So we've got to make sure there is affordable housing in those towns and that they have transportation to urbanized areas for when they need to go to the grocery store, or the hospital, or the drugstore. At DOT we can make sure we don't pour everything into urban areas, but also look out for rural America.

Q. In an [AARP poll of transit planners](#), two-thirds said they don't specifically take the needs of older Americans into account for their work. Is somebody at DOT specifically tasked with making sure your plans address the needs of this growing

segment of the population?

A. I have nine grandchildren; I think I know some of the concerns older people have. There's also a sensitivity among our employees about the needs of seniors. And this is the first time in the history of a DOT authorization bill that we're going to have a livability program in the legislation. That sends a pretty good message that this is not your grandfather's—or your grandmother's—DOT.

Q. Or maybe that it *is* your grandparents' DOT.

A. Exactly. The priorities are a lot different than they were five years ago.

Q. Within the president's Cabinet, you're also a member of a smaller group called the "Green Cabinet." What is that?

A. When we first got into these jobs, Carol Browner [the president's assistant for energy and climate change] gathered six or seven Cabinet secretaries around a table, and now it's turned into the Green Cabinet. It's Cabinet members like Interior, Agriculture and EPA, who are working on green jobs, sustainability, livable communities, affordable housing.

We get lunch together once a month and find ways we can share resources. The DOT, for example, is working with the EPA on fuel standards for automobiles. By 2012, we're going to get to 25 miles per gallon. By 2016 we'll get to 36 mpg. This level of collaboration would have been unheard of in another administration.

Q. A lot of alternative transportation proponents were disappointed the [economic stimulus program](#) didn't become a kind of Works Progress Administration for alternative transportation.

A. We got \$48 billion, of which \$16 billion was for transit and high-speed rail, and \$28 billion was for roads and bridges—because we could get it out the door quickly. I know people have criticized there's too much money going to highways, but it's a very quick way to fix up deteriorated infrastructure and put people to work.

When I've been out visiting these job sites, a lot of the workers were on unemployment in January and February, and now they have a good-paying job.

Many of these jobs will last 18 months, and by then hopefully we'll have an authorization bill that will really enhance alternative transit and high-speed rail.

Q. Why is the president so interested in public transit and high-speed rail?

A. Because he came from Chicago, where they have trains above ground and underground, they have buses, they have light rail.

We can do high-speed rail across the country, whether it's a train from Chicago to St. Louis that connects up to Wisconsin and Michigan or a train between Minnesota and Ohio. We're probably looking at three decades before we have true high-speed rail in the country. It took three decades to get the interstate system built, too.

Q. Do you ever walk or bike to work?

A. I haven't, really. I'm not allowed [for security reasons].

Q. How do you get your daily exercise, then?

A. I get up early, and I go to the House gym—as a former member of Congress I still have access—and get on the treadmill for about 45 minutes. I started jogging in 1980, and I've run two marathons. And I started biking because I could not get my wife to exercise, but she likes biking. We bought comfort bikes when we were in [Peoria](#), and now here in D.C. we go out on the C&O Canal trail along the Potomac River, and all we see are families and kids and people walking.

Q. Do you still have a car?

A. I have a [Hybrid Ford Escape](#) in Peoria, and I have a [1998 Buick](#) here in Washington.

Q. Wow, what kind of gas mileage does that Buick get?

A. Not very good, about 19 miles per gallon. It's a gas guzzler but didn't qualify for the clunker program. But we live in the Foggy Bottom area of D.C. and walk just about everywhere on the weekend.

Q. It sounds like you seek out livable communities in your personal life.

A. The idea of livable communities is not Ray LaHood's idea or Barack Obama's idea: It's the people's. This is what the people want right now.

Christie Findlay is deputy editor of Capitol File magazine and former editor in chief of Politics magazine.

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