

## **“Now is the Time to Build New Interstates”**

What an incredible event we witnessed this month with the lunar orbit of the Artemis II and its four-member crew. News coverage spent considerable time comparing the Artemis mission to the Apollo program, which was the last time humans had left low-earth orbit in December 1972. The mission of the Apollo Program was about landing a human on the moon, and I was five years old when Neil Armstrong accomplished that amazing feat in July 1969. I don't recall watching the event on TV, but I do remember the liftoffs of the other five Apollo missions, including the last one, Apollo 17, in December 1972. By then, I was entering my elementary school days, and one of our scientific readers announced the fourth human spaceflight program known as the Space Shuttle, which was designed to support a new mission called Skylab. In that announcement, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) described how it would build upon previous work and use the Apollo Applications Program, which was designed to carry payloads back and forth from Earth to the Space Station and later the Hubble Telescope. This was our space strategy and vision, and from 1981 to 2011, we flew 135 missions carrying 355 Astronauts supporting the space station, the Hubble Telescope, and other satellite deployments. In 2017, under the Trump Administration, Space Policy Directive-1 was issued that amended the nation's space policy to include going beyond low Earth orbit and once again adding moon exploration as one of our mission parameters. With that directive, we established the Artemis Space Program, and just this month, 54 years after our last Apollo mission, we sent four astronauts on a lunar orbital flight in the Artemis II. It is important to note that again, we built upon the previous space program by incorporating some of the hardware derived from the Space Shuttle, like the core stage rocket booster system, into the current Artemis flights.

Sixty-nine years ago, our nation embarked on another large-scale infrastructure program known as the Interstate Highway System. Conceived in the twenties, the program found life in 1957 with the signing of the Interstate Highway Act during the Eisenhower administration. While the Apollo program aimed to put a man on the moon by the end of the decade (1960s), the interstate highway construction was originally planned and budgeted for a fifteen-year build-out, but it took thirty-five years to complete in 1992. In 1991, with the passing of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), our national transportation policy shifted from building interstates to the maintenance, preservation, congestion relief, and safety of the existing system. It was at this time that we created the National Highway System (NHS), and our interstate highways were incorporated into this national network. It was also at this time that our transportation policy makers took a stab at defining the next generation of our interstate highway system with the creation of High Priority Corridors. Some of these corridors were existing interstates, but many were routes that would help complete a national interstate highway system. For example, as you move away from

the East Coast, the majority of our interstates run west to east with several south-to-north gaps in the network. By the time we reached the twenty-first century, there were 110 defined High Priority Corridors with several targeted for future interstate upgrades. But this is where our national transportation policy falls apart when it comes to the next generation of interstates. Every surface transportation bill since ISTEA has omitted formula funding for the High Priority Corridor network, requiring state DOTs to fund improvements within the framework of other transportation programs that have come online over the last thirty years, like the Surface Transportation Block Program, the National Highway Performance Program, and as recently as 2015, the National Highway Freight Program. Over the years, thirteen of these high-priority corridors have been congressionally designated as future interstates. But without a dedicated funding stream, not one has been completed to date.

So where do we go from here? In 2019, there was a special report, number 329, to the Transportation Research Board titled “Renewing the National Commitment to the Interstate Highway System: A Foundation for the Future,” where the committee made these recommendations: *The original Interstate Highway Construction Program was underpinned by a long-term, collaborative commitment among the states and the federal government. A comparable partnership is needed to renew and modernize the system and to ensure that it is resilient and responsive to the changing demands of users. Congress should legislate an Interstate Highway System Renewal and Modernization Program (RAMP).* The committee recommended that this program should be modeled after the original interstate construction program, including increasing federal partnership with a true strategic national vision and a 90 percent federal funding participation ratio. Today, we are in the last year of the current Surface Transportation Bill, which is scheduled to sunset in September 2026. We have an incredible opportunity to fund and build interstates again. Just like we amended Space Policy Directive-1 to allow for Lunar missions, we need language in the new highway bill to build interstate highways. This needs to include a national evaluation of our existing and future interstate corridors and a designed system that will take advantage of new technologies in transportation currently in place and technologies that have not even been invented yet. Therefore, we are asking all of our congressional leaders, transportation advocates, cities, counties, parishes, economic development organizations, chambers of commerce, highway contractors, transportation engineers, and tax-paying citizens to support Congressionally Authorized Future Interstate (CAFI) language in the Surface Transportation Reauthorization bill. Let’s get to building interstates again! Now is the time for our moon-shot event.

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Lauren Garduño is President and CEO of the Ports-to-Plains Alliance advocating for the improvement of three of the Nation's High Priority Corridors in the midwestern United States including the Ports-to-Plains, the Heartland Expressway, and the Theodore Roosevelt Expressway. Part of this route includes the designation of the future Interstate 27. Prior to this current assignment, Lauren spent thirty-five years with the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) where he held several executive management positions for the department. Lauren and the Ports-to-Plains Alliance have joined forces with several future interstate coalitions across the nation to form the Congressionally Authorized Future Interstate(CAFI) Coalition.