

## Q&A: Congressman Vernon Ehlers

Contributed by PT Editors  
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PT talks with Vernon J. Ehlers, U.S. Congressman from Michigan and senior member on the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, about the federal highway bill.

PT: The federal highway bill has been widely criticized for the earmarking it contained. Was there a national plan as well? Ehlers: The transportation bill is different from other authorization bills because most transportation funding comes directly from the fuel tax, so it also essentially appropriates money. In most other cases, authorizing bills set an upper limit and appropriators allocate the money. With the transportation bill, most of the earmarking occurs within the transportation committee and is not subject to annual appropriations. The actual percentage that goes to earmarking is very small; it's simply a way of allowing local priorities to be heard by Congress. PT: O.K. What were the primary policy objectives of the federal transportation bill? Ehlers: It was basically the same as it traditionally is. The fuel tax brings in money each year that must be allocated. The overarching purpose is to ensure that our nation has good roads, bridges, freeways, highways and transit systems. That's the goal, but within that broad goal there are many differences of opinion. For example, I think we should work harder to develop our mass transit and rail systems. Some of my colleagues say, "If we just build this freeway, we'll be fine for five years." I don't find that program sustainable. PT: Was there anything different this year about the bill's broader objectives because of the energy crises our country is facing? Ehlers: It's somewhat different. I think we emphasized transit a little more. But it's disappointing that we were unable to revise our taxation scheme. The fuel tax is calculated based on the number of gallons of fuel sold. We are striving to create more fuel-efficient vehicles, and that means we'll have more miles driven with less gas purchased. Under the current system, our infrastructure needs will continue to increase while our revenue declines. Unfortunately, it's not in our jurisdiction to change it; that responsibility belongs to the weights and means committee. We had a number of discussions, but it just wasn't resolved and so we ended up with the same old system as before. PT: Isn't this—one committee handling integral elements of another's operation—an indication of a structural deficiency within the legislative process? Ehlers: Well, yes and no. I think it's a bigger problem in Congress than it is in the state legislatures. Traditionally, every committee has its own jurisdiction. Certain committees handle tax policy, and we can try to persuade them, but if we can't, we live with it. I don't think it's the worst problem that we have to deal with, but it does make the entire process more difficult. PT: In general, how intimately involved are experts and local officials in drafting this kind of legislation? Ehlers: Well, I'm a little unusual perhaps, because I started out at the county commission level, which had jurisdiction over the county road commission. I can't speak for all members, but I know that in my case, I met with the road commissions of my counties, talked to the transit officials, talked to the rails-to-trails individuals and my recommendations were based entirely upon the suggestions I received from the professionals working in those areas. I've reviewed most of the Michigan transportation projects, and I'd say that about 90% of them were arrived at in direct consultation with local officials. Local officials are intimately involved in the development stages of these projects because they know more about the issues than anyone in Washington or even in the state capitol. PT: You mentioned that local officials and the public have a say in the process, yet many people complain about earmarking and pork projects. Does an electorate that is frequently more concerned with symbolic projects like building a new footbridge, saving an air base, building a new ferry terminal—instead of focused national legislation—bear some of the responsibility? Ehlers: Yes, I agree with that. It's a factor with a good deal of earmarking, and I'm quite willing to place some of the blame on the electorate because they form firm opinions on what should be done and convey them very strongly to us. As long as it's from a good cross-section of the electorate I really don't mind. I do object when it's smaller interest groups that have a very strong view on one particular issue that's really not reflected in the public at large. PT: Why is it difficult for elected officials to tackle long-term fixes to fundamental problems? Ehlers: I think it's genetic. Perhaps it's that we don't know how things are going to look in 30 years, so "let's just do this now." I think it's uniquely American; you go to Europe and they have buildings that last for centuries. Here you have buildings being torn down that were built 30 and 40 years ago. I think it's evidence of our inability to plan for the long term or to stick with long-term decisions once they've been made. Most of my constituents hear of a problem and they want it solved now. They don't care about the ramifications beyond the next year. PT: Whether the federal transportation bill is good or bad, it definitely moves us in a specific direction. What were the forces that manipulated the overall vision for the bill at the outset, and how were they changed through the process? Ehlers: Well, I hate to say this, but I'm not sure we deal very much with overall visions. I find this very frustrating, but at the same time, the political apparatus just doesn't lend itself very well to overarching visions. PT: Is there anything about the process itself that could be remedied to lend itself to better long-term planning and visionary policies? Ehlers: Not very easily. As Winston Churchill remarked, "Democracy is the worst system of government imaginable except for everything else we've tried." It's all part of the process when people with many differing points of view come together to represent constituents with differing points of view. It's not a pretty process, and it's not always a pretty result, but it seems to work better than anything else, so we live with it. PT: Congressman, thank you for your time. Vernon J. Ehlers represents Michigan's third Congressional district and is a senior member on the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure. He received his undergraduate degree in physics in 1956 and his Ph.D. in nuclear physics in 1960, both from the University of California at Berkeley.