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Guest Columnist: Forging the next generation of air traffic control

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Throughout his campaign President-elect Barack Obama rightly reminded us that small businesses are at the core of our nation's economic life and must be the focal point of our recovery. Our next president has also smartly identified transportation as a centerpiece of his plan to stimulate growth and create jobs. It is vital that in the first 100 days of his term, he move aggressively to do both.

To its credit, the Obama team is already in the process of packaging together a large-scale economic recovery plan that would initiate a wide range of highway and transportation projects. Our nation's highways are in desperate need of improvement and remain a valuable artery for commerce and transportation. However, to be successful the plan must also incorporate all other modes of transportation including, most importantly, aviation.

To safely meet the nation's growing air transport needs, we must modernize our existing system by deploying a "Next Generation" air traffic control system. This system will dramatically improve the efficiency of travelling by air over the next 30 years. Anyone who has used the commercial airlines recently can testify that our "hub and spoke" system is no longer working effectively. By funding and deploying "Next Gen" we can create jobs and lasting infrastructure while providing the taxpayer with long-term value.

Obama must foster a working partnership between the Federal Aviation Administration and small innovative companies to deploy "Now Gen" solutions in the short to medium term. A robust airport improvement program is the logical companion to the proposed Obama highway program as it will contain a wide array of projects that will create vital infrastructure. The aviation program should go beyond traditional bricks and gravel to include deploying more energy efficient equipment, such as navigational aids that use LED lighting systems to save energy and money. The Obama administration should create new incentives for small companies to take part in the "green tech" aviation revolution. By doing so, smaller firms could hire more people while working to deploy a wide range of products with lasting commercial and environmental benefits.

Obama should also formulate and launch a results-oriented strategy to provide greater opportunities to small businesses in the federal sector. At a minimum, he should ensure that federal agencies are meeting or exceeding their current mandates to offer a small percentage of their opportunities to small and minority-owned businesses.

Historically, there has been a strong bias among federal agencies to hire only very large firms for projects. This is largely based upon the fear a small business may not be in business for the length of the project, or that they will be criticized for not going with a household name if company does not perform to expectations.

Further, Obama and his Commerce secretary should aggressively position small and medium sized companies in markets overseas. Breaking in to foreign markets is too daunting or simply too expensive for many smaller companies. Many large countries, including China and India are undertaking massive transportation and infrastructure projects that could use the experience and expertise of American firms.

Lastly, he should work with Congress to secure long-term FAA funding for Next Gen and annual funding for the FAA. In the last Congress, the House passed an FAA funding bill by a wide margin and after much debate, several months ago the Senate recently reached compromise similar to the House bill. Rather than starting this process over, the administration should include this compromise funding mechanism as part of its transportation package for economic recovery and put it into effect without further delay.

More than 75 years ago, our nation put aside their differences and rolled up its sleeves to build the Golden Gate Bridge and host of other important infrastructure projects. The times and the challenges are different now. We must build more than roads and bridges. We must build new 21st century infrastructure, and in so doing, we will build new bridges to the global marketplace. But just as before, we must put this in the hands, and on the backs, of small businesses and entrepreneurs.

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