

PHYSICAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Our nation's physical infrastructure links people, goods, and ideas within the United States and beyond its borders and also houses key government activities, such as the processing of mail and social security payments. The transportation systems, telecommunications networks, oil and gas pipelines, and federal facilities we depend on are owned, funded, and operated by both the public and private sectors. The policy decisions made in addressing such critical challenges as traffic congestion, aging infrastructure, safety, security, deregulation, consumer protection, and project management and financing directly affect our nation's economic vitality and quality of life. These policy decisions involve economic, environmental, energy, and security concerns that require coordination across different sectors and various levels of government at a time when many face a looming fiscal crisis. Analysts for the Physical Infrastructure team help Congress, federal agencies, and the public address these challenges.

Our Work

Our reports and testimonies help Congress oversee a variety of federal agencies, including the Department of Transportation (DOT), the General Services Administration (GSA), and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), as well as other entities such as Amtrak and the Postal Service. Our work helps Congress and the entities we review ensure the continued efficiency, safety, and security of the nation's infrastructure by

- identifying best practices and financing alternatives available to maintain and modernize the nation's transportation systems and public buildings;
- assessing federal efforts to improve the safety, security, and capacity of our infrastructure;
- assessing the Postal Service's efforts to ensure its viability and accomplish its mission as it faces financial and competitive challenges in the 21st century;
- assessing the existing level of competition and availability of transportation and telecommunications services; and
- evaluating the management of major construction projects involving federal funding.

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Accomplishments and Key Projects

Our recent reports and testimonies have helped Congress prepare for reauthorization of transportation and aviation programs and have assessed competition in the transportation and telecommunications sectors. We identified the management of federal real property and the transformation of the Postal Service as high-risk areas and outlined actions needed to address longstanding problems.

In response to our reports and recommendations:

- Congress proposed legislation to significantly transform the Postal Service and to address its current business challenges.
- Following the release of anthrax in mail facilities, the Postal Service, GSA, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the National Response Team improved the guidelines for testing and communication of health-related information to workers and the public following the release of unforeseen hazardous substances.
- FCC, Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and industry associations are working together to foster additional research into the potential health effects of mobile phone service.
- Four federal agencies—the Departments of Transportation, Health and Human Services, Labor, and Education—launched a major initiative to improve the coordination, quality, and cost-effectiveness of transportation services that are provided to transportation-disadvantaged populations, including those who are elderly, disabled, or low-income.
- FCC has improved its annual survey of cable franchises, enabling it to collect more accurate data for assessing cable rate changes and the degree of competition.
- The President added real property reform to his Management Agenda and issued an executive order on the issue.

Currently, we are also

- assessing the impact of global developments on the U.S. aviation industry, with a special emphasis on international agreements, safety standards, and the use of performance-based organizations by other nations to both fund and manage air traffic;
- identifying improvements to DOT's system for testing and rating the safety of new cars, light trucks, vans, and SUVs;
- assessing protection efforts for high-profile office buildings and national icons;
- evaluating options for the transition to digital broadcast television, which will enable the federal government to recapture highly valuable radio spectrum that will be reassigned for public safety and advanced wireless services;
- identifying key practices in facility protection and assessing progress by the Interagency Security Committee, which is chaired by the Department of Homeland Security;
- evaluating the steps taken by DOT to ensure the safety of foreign partners of U.S. airlines;
- assessing DOT's approach for selecting cities to receive federal assistance for new transit rail projects
- evaluating the impact of auctions to allocate radio spectrum and factors affecting the deployment of broadband;
- evaluating FCC's program for subsidizing the availability of Internet access in schools and libraries;
- assessing the readiness of U.S. airports to accommodate the new large Airbus aircraft and safety issues it may raise;
- assessing major construction projects involving billions of federal dollars, including the Capitol Visitor Center, Kennedy Center, federal courthouses, and foreign embassies;
- evaluating Amtrak's cost controls and financial management practices; and
- assessing the safety of regional airlines and the availability of air service to small communities.