

BY STEVE ISRAEL AND GARY LABARBERA

Rep. Steve Israel (D-Huntington) has co-sponsored legislation to create a National Infrastructure Development Corporation. Gary LaBarbera, right, is president of the New York Central Labor Council.

This week rebate checks from Washington's economic stimulus plan will start leaving the Treasury's presses and landing in mailboxes throughout the country. While these checks will provide a needed "shot in the arm" for our economy, their impact will pale in comparison to the bold leap that the federal government could take to turn away from recession and build a 21st century economy.

Just as Franklin Roosevelt created a Works Progress Administration during the Great Depression and Dwight Eisenhower rebuilt America's economy with the Federal Interstate System in the 1950s, it's time for a major federal investment in infrastructure. Not only will this stimulate the economy over a long period, but it will lower state and county taxes, create jobs and improve our quality of life.

Why do we need a national infrastructure investment? The next time you drive over a bridge, you may not want to think of the following statistic: 153,000 bridges in the United States are functionally obsolete or deficient, according to the Department of Transportation. In fact, 58 percent of Long's Island's 700 bridges are considered functionally obsolete - a classification not so much about safety as about suitability for the volume of traffic a bridge experiences.

These bridges are part of a national infrastructure system in desperate need of repair. They are often adjoined by 162,000 miles of federal highways composed of pavement that is rated as unacceptable.

These conditions aren't minor annoyances, but contribute to adverse economic impacts. Traffic delays are costing the U.S. economy \$78 billion a year.

And it's not just our roads and bridges. We have fallen to 15th in the world in broadband technology deployment, our schools are antiquated, our energy grid is overworked and our air traffic control system is overburdened.

Altogether, the United States has an estimated \$1.6- trillion shortfall in funds required for infrastructure projects.

No wonder the American Society of Engineers assigned a cumulative grade of "D" in its assessment of America's drinking water, sewage treatment, navigable waterways, dams, energy grid, parks and schools.

A major factor in the fraying of America's infrastructure has been Washington's retreat from funding improvements. The federal government used to pay about 87 percent of the cost for certain water and sewer hookups. Now it pays nothing.

Yet we're spending \$3 trillion a year in Iraq [CORRECTION: An Opinion essay by Rep. Steve Israel and Gary LaBarbera published yesterday misstated the cost of the Iraq war. The total estimated cost is \$3 trillion. (A15 ALL 4/29/2008)] - seemingly at the expense of our own infrastructure needs. Local governments have been left to either raise taxes or watch their bridges and sewer pipes sag.

A major commitment by Washington in financing infrastructure improvements would vastly improve our economy and easily pay for itself. Each \$1 billion in infrastructure investment creates \$6.2 billion in economic activity, and 47,500 new jobs - all while reducing state and county taxes.

The country needs a National Infrastructure Development Corporation that would work with state and local governments to help finance infrastructure projects. Federal guarantees would significantly lower financing costs and help alleviate taxes.

Ultimately, the corporation would be supported by private investments, similar to Sallie Mae, which exists to inject capital into education.

Look around New York and you'll see the leaps our economy took when the government made investments in public works. Robert Moses' legacy, as imperfect as it is, includes Jones Beach and our state parks. When then New York Gov. Dewitt Clinton urged the State Legislature to approve funding to construct the Erie Canal, the population and importance of New York surged, and Western settlement advanced. Eisenhower's interstate highway system changed the way we travel to work and has now connected nearly every major U.S. city.

Now it's time for a 21st century strategy. One that maximizes new green energy projects and public transportation when possible. One that reclaims our world leadership in broadband and education.

It worked before. It will work again.