

Moving Iowa Forward Conference

Combining forces to address the issues facing Iowa's transportation systems, the Iowa departments of Transportation and Economic Development brought more than 200 stakeholders together Jan. 18 for a one-day session focused on what can be done to enhance transportation systems and economic development.

Keynote presenter John B. Ficker, president of the National Industrial Transportation League in Washington, D.C., highlighted the critical link between transportation and economic development. He also delved into the complicated relationships of carriers and shippers, and stressed the point that many companies are now both buyers and sellers of transportation solutions. Ficker talked about the critical capacity needs facing our country and how Congress is laying the groundwork to address this issue in the next reauthorization bill set for 2009.

Ficker noted driver shortages for trucking companies, increasing fuel costs, highway system congestion, proposed driver hours-of-service changes, and the move by some states to "sell" their infrastructure to private companies as critical needs to be addressed by the transportation industry. He quoted an American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials' report as saying the volume on the nation's roads is expected to double by 2035. Ficker continued, "If this is even half-correct, it will be difficult to keep up."

When discussing the sale of existing infrastructure being done in some states, Ficker warned of possible damage to the system as a whole, "The sale of infrastructure threatens to chop up the network. The transportation system in this country is a network."

Included in this network, says Ficker, is the rail system. He stated that increasing capacity of this system



John B. Ficker, president of the National Industrial Transportation League, was the keynote presenter at the Moving Iowa Forward Conference Jan. 18 in Des Moines.

is also a key ingredient to economic stability and growth. Ficker touched on issues with fuel, intermodal services, the role of short lines in the system, capital needs, tax credit legislation, and the need for a 21st century rail industry shipper/carrier relationship model as needs facing this transportation mode.

For all transportation professionals, security has come to the forefront in recent years. Ficker pointed out that in Congress, every senator and all but four congressmen are involved in some committee or subcommittee related to homeland security. Ficker called on the conference attendees to suggest a balance between the needs of the transportation systems and security of the country when communicating with legislators.

Ficker also urged attendees to work at increasing the level of urgency placed on solutions to transportation issues. He said, "This is a crisis-oriented country. Things are dealt with when the crisis hits." He pointed to leaders such as Lincoln (in establishing the transcontinental railroad) and Eisenhower (in planning the interstate system) whose leadership grew out of a sense of urgency that doesn't exist in today's climate.

For solutions, Ficker pointed to four elements as critical to the success of this nation's transportation system: technology, processes, productivity, and funding. He elaborated on the productivity element, "Rail and truck are no longer competitors. The system must work together." He reiterated the need for public/private collaboration and participation by both transportation and economic development factions.

Later in the day, Pete Rickershauer from the BNSF Railroad echoed Ficker's message of cooperation when he said that supply chains are shifting to intermodal transportation where rail is "moving more stuff than ever before, causing a capacity crisis."

The remainder of the day was filled with information delving into the details of personnel shortages in the trucking industry, containerized freight transportation, intermodal shipping, infrastructure innovations, and technologies to move the transportation industry forward.

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