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December 25, 2011

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Obama Bicycle Policy Wins Love From Cyclists, Scorn From Trucking Industry



JOAN LOWY : 04/14/10 11:04 AM ET : 



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WASHINGTON — Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, a weekend bicyclist, might consider keeping his head down and his helmet on. A backlash is brewing over his new bicycling policy.

LaHood says the government is going to give bicycling – and walking, too – the same importance as automobiles in transportation planning and the selection of projects for federal money. The former Republican congressman quietly announced the "sea change" in transportation policy last month.

"This is the end of favoring motorized transportation at the expense of non-motorized," he wrote in his government blog.

Not so fast, say some conservatives and industries dependent on trucking. A manufacturers' blog called the policy "nonsensical." One congressman suggested LaHood was on drugs.

The new policy is an extension of the Obama administration's livability initiative, which regards the creation of alternatives to driving – buses, streetcars, trolleys and trains, as well as biking and walking – as central to solving the nation's transportation woes.

LaHood's blog was accompanied by a DOT policy statement urging states and transportation agencies to treat "walking and bicycling as equals with other transportation modes." It recommends, among other things, including biking and walking lanes on bridges and clearing snow from bike paths.

Transportation secretary is normally a quiet post, a Cabinet backwater. But LaHood has been the administration's point man on an array of high-profile issues, from high-speed trains and distracted drivers to runaway Toyotas.

The new policy has vaulted LaHood to superstar status in the bicycling world. Bike blogs are bubbling with praise. A post on Ridemonkey.com calls him "cycling's man of the century." The Adventure Cycling Association's Web site calls LaHood "our hero."

"LaHood went out on a limb for cyclists," Joe Lindsey wrote on Bicycling.com. "He said stuff no Transportation secretary's ever said, and is backing it up with action."

The policy has also been embraced by environmentalists and many urban planners.

Word of the policy change is still filtering out beyond the bicycling and transportation communities, but the initial reaction from conservatives and industry has been hostile.

The National Association of Manufacturers' blog, Shopfloor.org, called the policy "dumb and irresponsible."

"LaHood's pedal parity is nonsensical for a modern industrial nation," said the blog. "We don't call it sacrilege, but radical is a fair description. It is indeed a sea change in federal transportation policy that could have profound implications for the U.S. economy and the 80 percent of freight that moves by truck."

LaHood said he has been surprised by the response.

"It didn't seem that controversial to me," he wrote in a second blog item. "After all, I didn't say they should have the only voice. Just a voice."

At a recent House hearing, Rep. Steve LaTourette, R-Ohio, suggested jokingly to a Transportation Department official that one explanation for the new policy is that the secretary's thinking has been clouded by drugs.

"Is that a typo?" LaTourette asked. "If it's not a typo, is there still mandatory drug testing at the department?"

The new policy is not a regulation and, therefore, not mandatory, Transportation undersecretary for policy Roy Kienitz responded to LaTourette.

But it's LaHood's view "that the federal government should not take the position that roads and trains are real transportation and walking and biking is not," Kienitz said. "His view is it's all real transportation, and we should consider it based on what benefits it can bring for the amount of money we spend."

That didn't satisfy LaTourette.

"So is it his thought that perhaps we're going to have, like, rickshaws carrying cargo from state to state, or people with backpacks?" asked the congressman.

Bicycling advocates have been blasting LaTourette. Andy Clarke, president of the League of American Bicyclists, with 300,000 affiliated members, called his comments "a little childish."

LaTourette said in an interview that he thinks bike paths, bike lanes and projects that make communities more walkable are fine but shouldn't be funded with money raised by a gasoline tax paid by motorists. The federal gas tax pays for most highway and transit aid, although lately general Treasury funds have been used to supplement the programs.

LaHood noted that LaTourette supports federal funds for a bike path in his district.

"The point is, on his Web site he's bragging about the fact that he got some money for a bike path," LaHood said. "He knows people in his district like them."

LaHood, 64, said he and his wife have biked on weekends for years. Three days before his announcement of the new policy, LaHood stood on a table to speak to a gathering of hundreds of bike enthusiasts in Washington. He drew cheers when he vowed the Obama administration will put affordable housing next to walking and biking paths.

"I'm not going to apologize for any of it," he said in the interview. "I think this is what the people want."

On the Net:

League of American Bicyclists:

<http://www.bikeleague.org/blog/2010/03/lahood-you-have-a-full-partner-in-ray-lahood/>