

Opinion | We fixed I-95 in 12 days. Here are our lessons for U.S. infrastructure.

By Josh Shapiro

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Infrastructure is the backbone of America, and our nation's progress has often been tied to our ability to complete major projects that spur economic growth and create real opportunity.

Yet today it often seems like every project — big or small — gets mired in a slog of reviews, permits and delays. This saps our innovative spirit, reduces citizens' trust that government can get things done and ultimately slows our progress as a nation.

After a critical stretch of Interstate 95 — one of the nation's busiest highways — collapsed in Philadelphia in June, experts told me it would take months to get traffic flowing again. Instead, state and local leaders and project managers on the ground made decisions quickly, thought creatively and worked together to rebuild and reopen the highway in just 12 days.

The playbook we developed shows that Americans can do big things again. And thanks to the federal Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, states and cities now have billions of dollars to spend on everything from highway and bridge repair to broadband expansion and clean energy.

Here are four key takeaways from I-95 that can help Americans capitalize on the federal investment.

1

Empower strong leadership

First, infrastructure projects require strong leadership. In Philadelphia, managers of every component of the project were empowered to be decisive, take ownership and make a call when necessary — not defer and delay to the often-circular bureaucracy.

Decisions were made quickly and in a synchronized manner. The demolition started as soon as the fire marshal cleared the site, and we had a full plan to rebuild the roadway ready when the demo crews completed their work. No time was wasted.

On the ground, project leaders could move fast. Michael B. Carroll, the state's transportation secretary, practically lived out of a trailer on the site, personally supervising construction and making decisions in real time. No one had to check with headquarters to keep the project moving; the construction site *was* headquarters.

2

Speed up the bureaucracy

Second, speed up the bureaucracy. We fast-tracked the permitting process to avoid delays while maintaining safety standards — relying on our experience with past permitting processes as well as the expertise of engineers and other professionals. Thanks to a disaster declaration I signed within 24 hours after the collapse, some bureaucratic requirements were waived completely.

Because most projects don't occur after a disaster, they wouldn't qualify for a similar declaration. Nevertheless, states can speed up the normal permitting processes. Here in Pennsylvania, I signed an executive order in my first month in office that catalogued each of the 2,400 permits, certificates and licenses we issue and set timelines for each of them. Already wait times have been cut — some by as much as 94 percent. While it once took up to eight weeks for an initial corporate license to be issued, it now takes just two days.

3

Encourage creativity

Third, encourage creativity and allow everyone to bring their ideas forward. We launched a 24/7 live stream so the public — the taxpayers funding our work — could track our progress and feel real ownership in the project.

When we needed to source backfill to rebuild the collapsed freeway, PennDOT engineers pointed us to a recycled glass product being used on a nearby project that is weather-resistant, lighter than traditional dirt and shown to be reliable. And it's manufactured in Pennsylvania.

When rain threatened to slow us down because a wet surface wasn't conducive to the work required, the Pennsylvanians at Pocono Raceway almost 100 miles to the north agreed to provide their NASCAR turbo dryer to keep us moving along.

4

Work together

Fourth, work together. At every step of the I-95 project, local, state and federal officials coordinated closely with each other, and the collaborative approach extended to our private contractors and organized labor. Some politicians may criticize unions, but here in Pennsylvania, we saw a proud and diverse group of more than 200 members of the Philadelphia Building Trades work around-the-clock, through heat and rain and Father's Day weekend, to get the job done safely and with tremendous skill.

The eyes of the nation were on the rebuilding of I-95. I hope Americans can use some of its lessons in taking advantage of the opportunity to safely, quickly and smartly strengthen our nation's infrastructure.