

Americans for Transportation Mobility



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Fueling the Florida Transportation Issue

- Among the media hits Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT) received after launching an Internet contest asking visitors to vote for Florida's worst road was a June article that mentioned that 45 percent of more than 57,000 visitors to GetFloridaMoving.org gave I-4 the nod. (Source: *The Reporter/The Ledger*)
- On the GetFloridaMoving.org site, a quote from the late President Reagan that "Status Quo is Latin for 'the mess we're in'" reveals Doug Callaway's passion for slogans and messages that trigger attention.
- In a winter 2004 article in the *Florida Transportation Builder*, Callaway underscored the link between economics and transportation and reiterated a Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) statistic that each dollar invested for highways, rail and transit yields \$5.50 in economic benefits.
- In a press release in February 2003 about the state's plan to raid the trust fund, Callaway wrote: "The trust of the people is easy to lose, but very difficult to replace. We urge Florida's policymakers to preserve the trust by protecting the transportation trust fund."
- Letters to legislators have been just one tool FBT has used to communicate its position on issues. One, for instance, mentioned a 2003 report from The Road Information Program (TRIP) showing that Florida led the nation in deaths for older drivers, with 268 Florida drivers over the age of 70 dying in traffic accidents in 2001.

In Florida, Doug Callaway Evangelizes Transportation

As Congress wrestles with passing critical transportation funding legislation, there's no surprise that thick reports and studies, hours of debate and technicalities that would confound the average citizen are the norm. But states away from the Washington, D.C. hotbed of bureaucratic jargon, one transportation advocate is communicating beyond political venues to an equally important audience: the American public.

Meet Doug Callaway, the transportation preacher and zealot whose brainstorms include creating buttons and bumper stickers that promote transportation funding and expose problems as well as using the Internet for grassroots outreach and inviting the public to post "pictures of gridlock and ramshackle roads."

His PR philosophy? "Everybody wants to have some mental bumper sticker upon which they can hang the information that they're given – a mental framework."

Callaway is president of Floridians for Better Transportation (FBT), a statewide business and transportation association whose goal is to make transportation in Florida safer and more efficient. One of its most recent ventures, launched in March of this year, is GetFloridaMoving.org, a vibrant and user-friendly website that invites visitors to share their traffic stories, vote for the state's worst road and access sample letters to legislators and local newspapers.

Meet Doug Callaway, president of Floridians for Better Transportation, a statewide business and transportation association.

The public-angled website – along with the nonprofit's home website, www.bettertransportation.org – helps FBT shine a "public spotlight" on the necessity of funding transportation and avoiding budget gaps. The cyber destination is a linchpin tactic in the approximate \$80,000 GetFloridaMoving.org PR campaign FBT kicked off this year (that figure includes the creation of the website and the needed technical work).

But it is also more than that.

GetFloridaMoving.org is an example of how technology has made communications easier and more cost-effective in the last decade or so as well as ushered in the era of viral marketing (recipients pass on email messages to others who can opt in to receive them). Callaway estimates that electronic communications cost less than one-tenth of what would be allocated if FBT primarily relied on print products to communicate its goals and messages.

FBT's job, adds Callaway, is to make transportation "interesting by connecting the dots" and communicating why transportation is so important.

"Let's be honest. Transportation is not a sexy subject – it's not something that people talk about at cocktail parties," Callaway says. "The only way they talk about it and the way the public really gets motivated about transportation is when you start talking about being stuck in traffic. You know, 'Traffic was bad today or I was late for my daughter's piano recital.' ...When it suddenly becomes not an intellectual issue but a visceral issue, a quality of life issue that people feel strongly about, that's when they [transportation leaders] start to make progress."

In Florida today, "progress" in the legislative and transportation realms is not just a label used to frame some hyped-up concept.

It's a reality: Through the efforts of advocates such as Callaway, the Florida legislature passed on the last day of the 2005 session a bill that will provide an additional \$1.1 billion for transportation in the next fiscal year and an additional \$542 million each subsequent year.

During the course of this year's legislative session, Callaway proved how powerful simple messages and cyclic emails to FBT members, legislators, transportation leaders and grassroots supporters can be. Email messages characterized Florida's shortfall in transportation funding as "a \$23 billion pothole in the road to our future" and shared results of a Mason-Dixon poll that revealed that 75 percent of Florida voters believe the state should dedicate more monies to transportation funding.

Transporting His Career

Leading FBT is a natural fit for Callaway. He cut his teeth on transportation issues and the preservation of funding while working in the 1980s for former Florida congressman Tom Lewis (R-North Palm Beach).

Callaway also served as the federal programs coordinator for the Florida Department of Transportation (FDOT) for 12 years – a span that included working on the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency ACT (ISTEA) and TEA-21 and advocating for crucial federal transportation funding. (Callaway remembers that early on he was exposed to the political game of raiding trust funds to pad the bottom line – an enduring transportation controversy.)

After the FDOT job, Callaway was a transportation program manager with Carter & Burgess, a national architectural/engineering consulting and management firm based in Fort Worth, Texas. But eventually Fred Leonhardt, then chairman of FBT, asked him to head FBT and guide it through a transitional phase.

Several weeks into his new FBT job, Callaway learned that the Florida executive and legislative branches were advocating diverting \$200 million annually from the State Transportation Trust Fund over the course of five years.

Callaway quickly identified the "human element" and began to communicate what Florida wanted to do in a way that had real impact. He helped create the TRU\$T coalition (Transportation Revenues Used \$trictly for Transportation) and bright yellow buttons that amounted to traveling, albeit small, billboards. The purpose was to spread the message that raiding the trust fund (monies derived primarily from state and federal gas tax revenue) meant the government was breaking its implied contract with the public.

The diversion was later limited to one year and Callaway began to conceive new and catchy ways of promoting and publicizing the preservation of transportation earmarks and funding.

The STOP Highway Robbery campaign (its grassroots draw was a bumper sticker) was launched in late 2003. In late 2003 and early 2004, the TRU\$T coalition unveiled the Transportation Trust Fund Protection Pledge – a way of asking legislators to sign pledges stating that they would oppose and vote against further raids. In the end, 25 out of 40 members in the state Senate signed the pledge and rallied around an important message.

"I think Doug has single-handedly stopped the raid on the trust fund," says Leonhardt, a lobbyist and lawyer with the Orlando, Fla.-based law firm Gray-Robinson. "Doug's got them scared to death."

The Trust Put in Doug

The idea that Callaway's style is at all scary seems unlikely when you chat with him. The consummate conversationalist, he is able to engage his audience about a topic that some have made about as boring as sitting through three hours of bingo with your grandmother while she's the only one playing.

The passion he has for transportation and related subjects even defies the limitations of phone lines and before you know it, you're convinced.

When the *ATM Insider* spoke with Callaway, naturally the subject was transportation. But it was also economics, history, preservation, politics, and Americana. On the history and preservation fronts, Callaway reminds that it was George Washington who surveyed the first national road and Thomas Jefferson who commissioned the first national highway. On the political, economic and Americana fronts, he is able to link *The Washington Post's* picture of an old woman digging through the trash in Moscow before the fall of the Soviet Union to transportation.

"This was not a failure of agriculture," he muses. "It was a failure of transportation. The reason there were crops rotting in the field that couldn't get from farm to market was a distribution problem."

It's a heady topic for sure. But that is part of what makes Callaway unique. He is able to talk about transportation on both an intellectual and pragmatic level. Recalling the issue of the

raid several years ago, he offers this ncomplicated point: "I thought and that's where you get kind of indignant and you go, 'Wait a minute.' That's not any more of living within your means than my wife and I if we were to dip into our daughters' college funds that we didn't put any money into, but granddad and grandma do."

And he also speaks about the advantages Americans have and what their forefathers gave them, including a national transportation system. "We shouldn't have such a high level of hubris to think 'Oh, this was all given to us by divine right and without lifting a finger we'll maintain our leadership, our preeminence.' It doesn't take that much to fall and transportation makes all that possible."

Callaway penned the essay, "A Conservative Case for Transportation Investments: Reclaiming a Lost American Heritage," which appeared in the inaugural issue of the newly launched *Florida Transportation Monthly*.

In it, he wrote verbatim: "In Florida, TRANSPORTATION – *not* General Electric – 'brings good things to life.' Virtually everything we eat, drink, wear, drive or buy was somehow provided through transportation. But if we expect these benefits to continue, we've got to increase transportation funding to meet our state's growing transportation needs."

Callaway views the article as a way of leveraging FTB's resources and messages. For example, he was able to reach two million members of the AAA Auto Club South when it published an article about the trust fund raids in one of its publications. With the exception of the monies earmarked for the GetFloridaMoving.org campaign, FBT operates on a lean PR budget of less than \$15,000 annually because of the myriad ways its members contribute to its causes, both financially and through PR and partnership routes.

Callaway's CV

In addition to being a savvy PR trendsetter and writer, Callaway is also a gifted speaker. He says he makes about 20 to 30 speeches a year – what he calls "talks."

Last week, he spoke at events hosted by the Women's Transportation Seminar Central Florida Chapter, the Florida Association of Convention and Visitors Bureaus, and the Asphalt Contractors Association of Florida.

The coup de grace came, however, when he attended a June 24th ceremony during which Gov. Jeb Bush signed the new "growth management" bill that provides for the additional transportation funding.

But Callaway was more than part of the wallpaper of guests in the room that day.

Gov. Bush, by all accounts, knows who Callaway is and the PR efforts he has spearheaded. Leonhardt recalls meeting with the governor on another matter during the legislative session of 2003 when Leonhardt was chairman of FBT. The governor told him that he saw people wearing the TRU\$T buttons "all over the [state] Capitol."

And that moment has helped prove that steady and smart grassroots PR does reach people who can change the course of history.