Op-eds & LTEs: Let out your Inner Pundit

Op-Eds
Op-eds appear opposite the editorial page. They are issue opinion pieces written by local readers in local markets or national figures in top tier newspapers, and are an important opportunity to help influence the dialogue around your issues and tie your organization to timely events & topics. Here are some tips on getting started:

- Call the editorial page editor to assess the upcoming calendar, word limit, and interest in your topic.

- Think fresh. Try to include:
  - A fresh idea or angle to the debate
  - New data
  - An unusual messenger
  - Reasons why readers should care about the issue

- Paint a picture. Include the reasons why readers should care about the topic, succinct background information, supporting facts, a personal perspective or story that illustrates why your issue is important, and a clear “call to action” that articulates what next steps you’d like to see from policymakers or the community at large.

- Keep it short. Op-eds are usually 600 words or less, and are subject to editing by the paper.

Letters to the Editor
Letters to the Editor are a quick and powerful way to communicate with your legislators and community about issues.

- Make it newsy. Letters are most likely to be printed when they address a news article or editorial item and relate to a timely issue (an upcoming event, policy, etc).
- Keep it short. Letters should be 250 words or less.
- Include all pertinent information about the issue--most importantly, why it’s important to you and your community.
- Include your name, address, daytime telephone number and title if pertinent.

(See a sample Op-ed on the back)
Sample Op-ed

A 21st Century Transportation Vision
By James Corless, Director, Transportation for America
Roll Call, July 14, 2009

Every few generations, innovations in transportation spur a revolution in how people and goods move around, with profound implications for how and where we build our cities and towns, and ultimately, how we live.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, federal policies reshaped our still-young country by actively promoting the building of railroads and the settling of vast swaths of new territory. In 1956, when gasoline was 20 cents a gallon and babies were booming, President Eisenhower initiated the largest public works program in history with the Interstate Highway Act, an ambitious network of coast-to-coast superhighways that would help reshape the American landscape.

Today, with the interstate system essentially complete, the era of cheap energy behind us and Baby Boomers headed toward retirement, we live a in a very different world. As the current federal transportation law expires on September 30th, there is almost universal consensus that we need a new vision for a transportation system that meets the needs and aspirations of this century. Fortunately, as the bipartisan bill from Chairmen Oberstar and DeFazio, and Representatives Mica and Duncan demonstrates, they understand this need for a new, more comprehensive vision of what our national transportation policies need to be. The Administration’s new Livability Initiatives, which draw linkages among USDOT, HUD and EPA, also show an understanding of the complex interrelationships between transportation policy, housing and energy.

Transportation for America applauds these efforts. Our coalition of more than 300 organizations represents a broad cross section of transportation, housing, public health, real estate, social justice and local government interests. We believe we must increase accessibility to affordable transportation options by developing convenient public transportation networks, safe places to walk and bike, smarter highways that use technology and tolling to better manage congestion, new high speed rail networks and more livable communities that can reduce commute times by providing more affordable housing near jobs, schools and services.

There is also a growing consensus that the new transportation bill must be guided by a set of clear, measurable objectives. Rep. Holt, Inslee and Carnahan’s National Transportation Objectives Act, HR2724, outlines specific national transportation objectives and performance targets that our federal transportation investments should meet. Incorporating these types of performance measures into our federal transportation program is essential to making sure we’re getting the biggest bang for our buck.

But to seriously transform our system and build the transportation infrastructure our country needs, we are going to need to pay for it. That will require a major investment on the part of the American people. While it may be politically difficult to consider new revenue sources, a number of promising proposals have been made by Chairman DeFazio, Representative Blumenauer and others. Americans have consistently voiced public support for infrastructure investments that will lead to
more comprehensive transportation systems as long as that spending is tied to serious reforms, increased accountability and new transparency measures.

Already leaders in Congress are coming together around a new approach to our national transportation policy, but getting the details right will be essential. Chairmen Oberstar and DeFazio’s transportation bill would substantially increase the investment in public transit from current levels, while making enormous strides to restore our existing highways, bridges and transit facilities to good condition. Local governments are given increased funding and latitude, as well as new incentives to link housing, climate, energy and other national priorities to their transportation plans. These proposals, along with moves to upgrade attention given to rural areas and to create an office of livability, all signify a clear shift in thinking about what our national transportation vision needs to be and what types of policies need to be in place to reform current policy and programs.

Authorization of a new transportation bill occurs once every six years, but a chance at truly transformational change comes only once in a generation. The new transportation bill can and should redefine how the American people get around for decades to come just as the highway system envisioned by President Eisenhower more than 50 years ago still defines us today.

Americans cannot afford to wait for a safe, clean and smart transportation system that allows us to compete and thrive in the 21st century. The need to move forward with a long-term authorization is now.