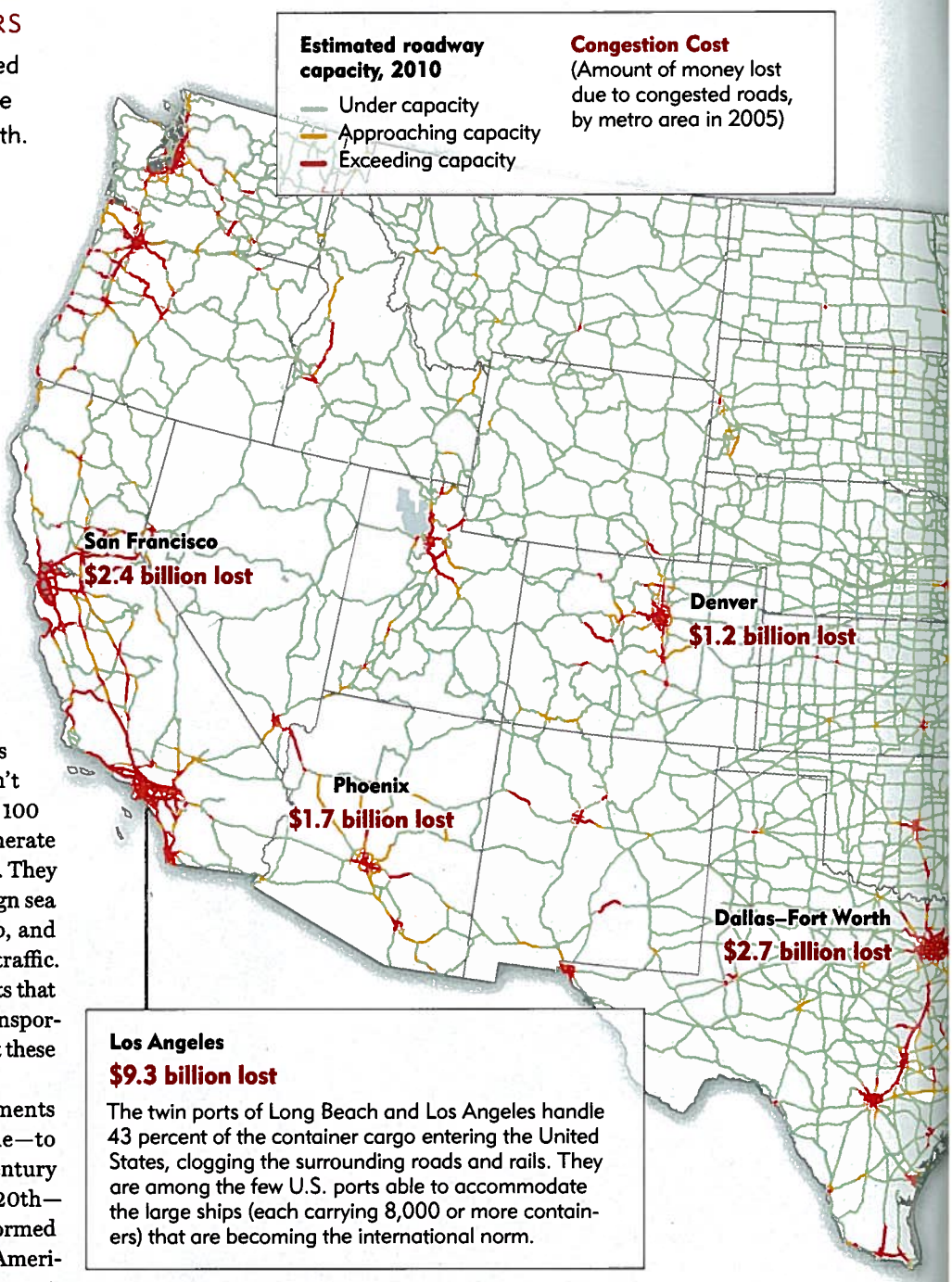
THE NATION IN NUMBERS

America's aging and congested road, rail, and air networks are threatening its economic health.

Clogged Arteries

BY BRUCE KATZ AND ROBERT PUENTES

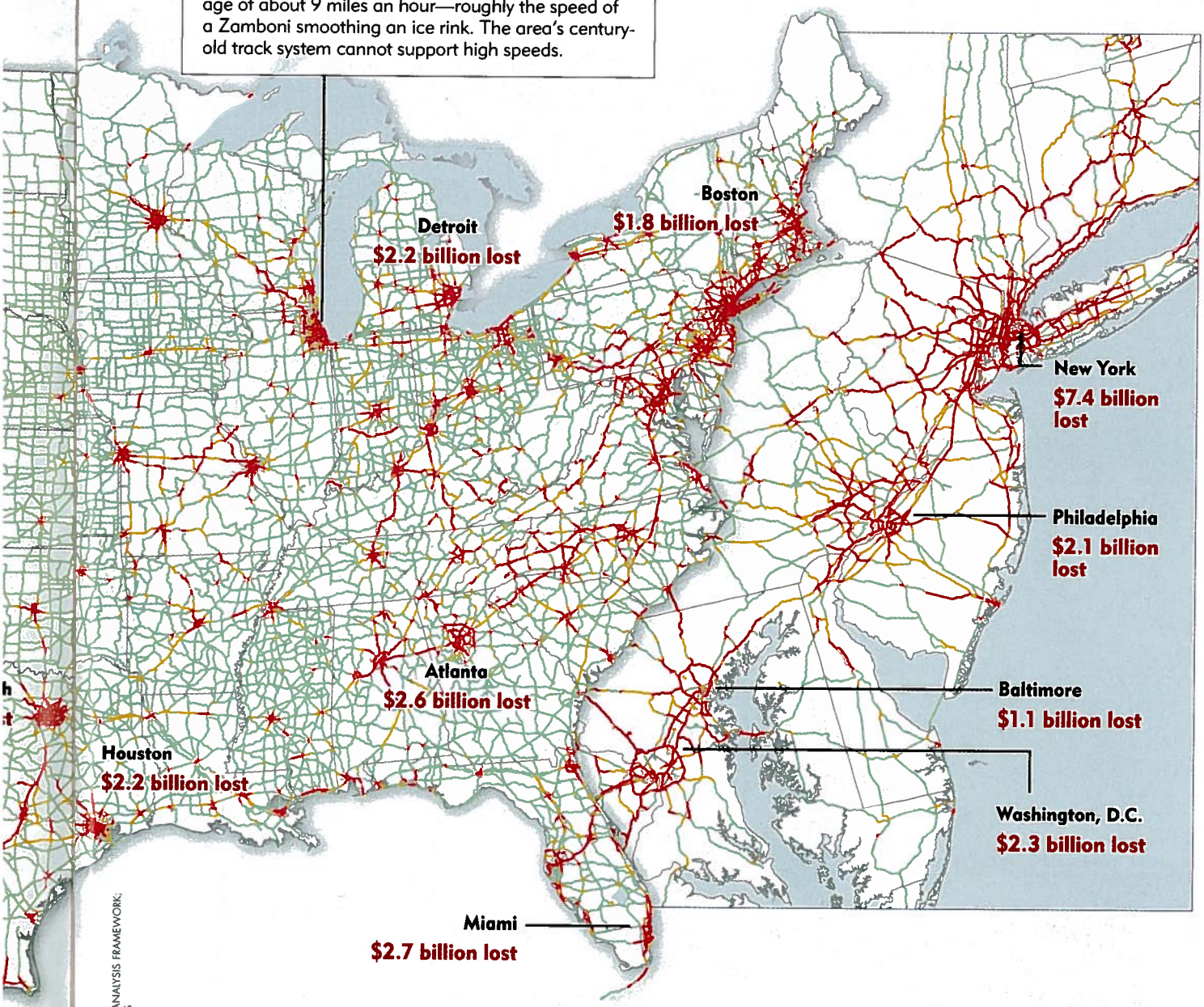


Transportation spending is spread around the United States like peanut butter, and while it's spread pretty thick—nearly $50 billion last year in federal dollars for surface transportation alone—the places that are most critical to the country's economic competitiveness don't get what they need. The nation's 100 largest metropolitan regions generate 75 percent of its economic output. They also handle 75 percent of its foreign sea cargo, 79 percent of its air cargo, and 92 percent of its air-passenger traffic. Yet of the 6,373 earmarked projects that dominate the current federal transportation law, only half are targeted at these metro areas.

In the past, strategic investments in the nation's connective tissue—to develop railroads in the 19th century and the highway system in the 20th—turbocharged growth and transformed the country. But more recently, America's transportation infrastructure has not kept pace with the growth and evolution of the economy. As earmarks have proliferated, the government's infrastructure investment has lost focus. A recent academic study shows that public investment in transportation in the 1970s generated a return approaching 20 percent, mostly in the form of higher productivity. Investments in the 1980s generated only a 5 percent return; in the 1990s, the return was just 1 percent.

The map above shows an estimate of road-traffic congestion in 2010. In most major metro areas, it is steadily worsening. The cost of congestion, including added freight cost and lost productivity for commuters, reached $78 billion in 2005. Half of that occurred in just 10 metro areas.

America's biggest and most productive metro regions gather and strengthen the assets that drive the country's prosperity—innovative firms, highly productive and creative workers, institutions of advanced research. And the attributes of some cities are not easily replicated elsewhere in the U.S. The most highly skilled financial professionals, for instance, do not choose between New York and Phoenix. They choose between New York and London—or Shanghai.



SOURCES: FEDERAL HIGHWAY ADMINISTRATION FREIGHT ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK; TEXAS TRANSPORTATION INSTITUTE; MAP BY RYAN MORRIS

While many factors affect that choice, over time, the accretion of delays and travel hassles can sap cities of their vigor and appeal. Arriving at Shanghai's modern Pudong airport, you can hop aboard a maglev train that gets you downtown in eight minutes, at speeds approaching 300 miles an hour. When you land at JFK, on the other hand, you'll have to take a train to Queens, walk over an indoor bridge, and then transfer to the antiquated Long Island Rail Road; from there, downtown Manhattan is another 35 minutes away.

To power our metropolitan engines, we need to make big, well-targeted investments that improve transportation within and around them. Above all else, that means taking a less egalitarian approach to our infrastructure: there is little justification for making small improvements all over the place.

In a post-agricultural, postindustrial, innovation-dependent economy, the roads to prosperity inevitably pass through a few essential cities. We should make sure they're well maintained.

Bruce Katz is the director of the Brooking Institution's Metropolitan Policy Program. Robert Puentes is a fellow in the Metropolitan Policy Program.