Keep Europe moving: sustainable mobility for our continent

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PURPOSE: a mid-term review of the European Commission's 2001 Transport White Paper based on the sustainable mobility of Europe.

CONTENT: the EU's transport policy is based on sustainability. Its objectives are to provide Europeans with an efficient and effective transport infrastructure. Effective transport systems are essential to Europe' s prosperity. It also impacts upon Europe's economy, social development and environment. Currently, transport accounts for 7% of European GDP and 5% of employment. The mobility of both goods and persons is an essential component of Europe's competitiveness. It is also an essential right.

Some of the main challenges facing the European transport infrastructure are:

- an imbalance between the different transport modes;
- on-going congestion problems (both on roads and in airspace); and
- the environmentally damaging effects of transport.

Since 2001, the year that the White Paper on Transport was published, a number of legislative proposals have been approved and are being put in to practice, which should help alleviate some of the challenges identified above.

The largest share of intra-EU transport remains the road which accounts for 44% of freight and around 85% of passenger transport. Demand factors, such as a reduction in heavy bulk transport and the increasing importance of door-to-door and just-in-time service has contributed to the strong sustained growth of road transport. The share carried by rail and air is 10% and 6% respectively. One of the main structural trends is the fact that rail freight transport has halted its relative decline since 2001 and is on a growth path in a number of Member States.

Another salient trend is the strong and sustained dynamism of air and waterborne transport. Air transport dominates the long-distance passenger transport market. Maritime transport accounts for 39% of internal goods transported.

Although a major contributor to growth, transport is associated with a number of costs. Its environmental cost alone is estimated to stand at 1.1% of GDP. Further, air quality standards in many cities are not being met and infrastructure developments need to be designed, which take account of nature protection and planning restrictions. Road congestion has increased and is costing the EU about 1% of GDP. Attention must also be paid to noise pollution.

Safety, on the other hand, has improved considerably. Road fatalities have declined by more than 17% since 2001 – although not in all of the Member States. Road remains the most dangerous mode of transport accounting for 41 600 deaths and more than 1.7 million injuries. The Commission urges all actors to step up their efforts to improve road safety.

The Communication notes that transport policy is closely intertwined with energy policy – for example, lowering CO2 emissions and reducing EU import dependency on fossil fuels. Yet, transport accounts for

some 71% of all oil consumption in the EU of which 60% is used by road transport users; 9% is used by air transport users. Rail transport utilises some 75% of electricity and 25% of fossil fuels. The Paper points out that the EU is committed to promoting energy efficiency at an EU level. To do so the EU supports voluntary agreements, further research, the use of new engines, the use of intelligent vehicle energy management systems and the promotion of alternative fuels including biofuels and hydrogen.

In terms of optimising infrastructure, the EU wishes to address two challenges. Firstly, reducing congestion and secondly, increasing accessibility. To realise these objectives the Commission will encourage and co-ordinate investment in new or improved intelligent infrastructure in order to eliminate bottlenecks and prepare for the introduction of co-operative systems which allow co-modal transport solutions and to connect peripheral regions and the outermost regions of the EU with the mainland.

As far as financing of the 30 TEN priority projects is concerned the Communication notes that the total cost in 2004 amounted to EUR 250 billion. The public financing capacities of the Member States, however, remain limited and the level of investment in infrastructure transport, at a national level has fallen in recent years accounting for less than 1% of GDP. In view of this the Commission proposes that limited resources should focus on the critical cross-border crossing sections and other main bottlenecks on priority projects. It also urges the Member States to optimise the use of the EU Structural and Cohesion Funds to support the financing of transport infrastructure.

The Communication also discusses the matter of “Smart Charging”. Charging for the use of infrastructure is increasingly common in the EU – such as the London congestion charge. The EU has just adopted a new road charging framework Directive which introduced modulated tolling for lorries operating on the trans-European network. In accordance with the road charging Directive, the Commission is committed to introducing, no later than June 2008, a generally applicable, transparent and comprehensive model for the assessment of all external costs. This should serve as a basis for future calculations of infrastructure charges and will be accompanied with an impact analysis of the internalisation of external costs for all modes of transport.

In terms of intelligent transport systems the EU is forging ahead with a number of related issues including “The Intelligent Car Initiative”, the eSafety Forum, SESAR (introducing modern technologies to air traffic management with the European Single Sky), ERTMS (intelligent systems for the rail sector) and RIS, River Information Services, which is already being deployed on the main European corridors. Much of these systems will be dependant on Galileo navigation signals.

The Communication concludes by noting that 1992 was the completion date of the Internal Market. For transport this was very much the starting date. Some 15 years on and the liberalised internal transport market and Europe-wide mobility has become a reality. The transport industry has strengthened considerably and the Union is in a good position to maintain or develop its global positioning.

The mid-term review argues for a comprehensive, holistic approach to transport policy. The Commission argues for greater complementary action at a national, regional and local level. A European sustainable mobility policy needs to be built on a broad range of policy tools and most importantly needs to shift into a more environmentally friendly gear. The policy directions outlined in this Communication will be refined on the basis of a public consultation and in-depth assessments before specific measures are decided upon. They will also be adjusted over time to take account of shifting times and experience gained.