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Just a distraction

U.S. DOT chief LaHood has little to hang his hat on

I am not typing while wearing a hands-free device.

I should, although in this case it really should be called a fingers-free device, because I can't think of any other way to pay tribute to Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood's legacy.

Believe me, I would much rather be all decked out in a hardhat, safety vest and steel-toed boots while I pave out the words to this latest column, but that is not how I would dress up his brief stint as the grand marshal of transportation.

If you think about the road LaHood has gone down during this anticlimactic tenure, he has stayed in one lane: driver distraction.

What brought me to write about his recent accomplishment-free days in Washington, D.C., was my latest trip to our nation's capital, when a number of prominent figures in the road and bridge industry told me how disappointed they were in LaHood. Made up to be some legislative Iron Man from the equipment epicenter of the world (central Illinois), he was expected to keep one thing constant in this administration of change: long-term highway funding.

However, the Peoria politician seems to be lip-synching the rhetoric of his last two predecessors. Norm Mineta initially stormed out and said he wanted a robust six-year transportation bill. He even talked to then-President George W. Bush about increasing the federal gas tax before backpedaling on his initial funding number (which was well over \$300 billion over six years) and settling on a drizzly amount that was eventually escalated to \$284.5 billion. Mary Peters shut the door on her U.S. DOT rule by trying to put a padlock on the federal government's involvement in highway funding. Still, under Mineta's watch Congress passed the largest piece of transportation legislation in American history, and at the very least Peters' push for project streamlining made some progress.

LaHood initially stormed out and said he supported a mileage-based tax to help carry the next-generation highway bill, but was quickly caned with an umbrella by the Obama administration. Sounds like he pulled a Mineta. Now he is preaching the familiar hands-off tone that

involves more tolling and public-private partnerships. And that, my friends, is a perfectly executed Peters maneuver.

Admittedly, LaHood's stint opened into total darkness with a dying Highway Trust Fund, but even I thought he would put his stamp into more than distracted driving two years into term. You can't really put his initials on stimulus funding, either, and TIGER grants, with their high-speed rail slant, have been used as a cheap pacifier for the road and bridge industry.

The tragedy about it all is LaHood could have already cast his bronze statue for the steps of the U.S. DOT headquarters. Not only could he have led the cavalry into passing the biggest transportation bill ever assembled—one that would include ample dollars for groundbreaking transit and urban livability initiatives,

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but he also could have helped replace the sugar-tainted mixture currently sitting in the work force gas tank with high-performance jet fuel. Instead, his legacy, combined with the workings of the Obama administration, is quickly becoming known for what you can't see (high-speed rail) and what you are not allowed to look at (cell phones).

I did hear one great anecdote while in Washington. It did call for a raise in the gas tax, but a portion of the increase would go toward deficit reduction. It has worked before. A day after recycling that prescription, LaHood publicly announced that the chances of increasing the gas tax were "dead." It was as if he had been listening in on my conversation. Of course, if that had been the case, maybe he would have learned something. **R&B**