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Funding Resilient Infrastructure in New Jersey: Attitudes Following a Natural Disaster

**Robert B. Noland, Ph.D., Marc D. Weiner, Ph.D.,
and Michael R. Greenberg, Ph.D.**

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The long-term transportation funding crisis is due to increased maintenance and infrastructure needs and flat and declining federal gasoline tax revenues. Some states cope with this crisis by increasing revenue sources. New Jersey is a case-in-point, with a nearly-insolvent transportation trust fund, little prospect of increasing what is now the second-lowest fuel tax in the nation, and an extensive backlog of maintenance needs.

New Jersey residents are loath to levy tax increases to improve infrastructure resilience.

This crisis is compounded by recent natural disasters, notably Hurricane Irene in 2011, followed a year later by Superstorm Sandy. Sandy devastated New Jersey shore communities while Irene delivered significant internal flooding. These extreme weather events demonstrated first-hand the need to improve resilience and maintenance of existing infrastructure and underscore the need to increase the transportation system's resilience.

In the immediate aftermath of Superstorm Sandy, this research evaluated public attitudes in New Jersey about funding more resilient infrastructure. The objective was to assess whether natural disasters and experience with damaged infrastructure affect public attitudes toward revenue sources that can be dedicated to protecting vulnerable areas, most notably the transportation linkages on which the state depends.

Study Methods

A statewide survey was administered approximately four months after Superstorm Sandy; a time when the extent of the damage was fresh in the memory of survey respondents. The survey was administered to 605 respondents between February 15 and March 27, 2013 using random digit dialing of a 65% landline and 35% cell-phone frame. At the completion of the field period, the AAPOR3 response rate was 18% with a cooperation rate of 35%.

The survey gathered data on:

- Attitudes toward five temporary revenue-raising approaches for funding improved resiliency;
- The perceived importance of investing in transportation infrastructure;
- Respondents' memories of Superstorm Sandy and Hurricane Irene;
- Political affiliation, attitudes, and demographics.

Findings

- While the results show little to no support for the proposed revenue-raising policies, a majority of respondents agree that it is important to invest in new roads, new transit, and maintenance and protection for existing transportation infrastructure.
- The majority of respondents did not support raising revenue by a tax increase, whether as a five cent gasoline increase, a one percent income increase, or a one percent sales increase, all limited to five years. A small majority supported a one percent hotel/recreational tax increase with a five-year term, and a plurality support issuing 30-year bonds. This pattern suggested attitudinal groupings, confirmed by factor analysis, of two basic funding perspectives: “tax others”—visitors and future generations—or “tax myself.”



Hurricane Sandy Devastation on the Jersey Shore

- Respondents who were more “left-leaning” in their political beliefs were more likely to support taxing themselves. It was also found those who agree on the importance of investing in public transit and protecting infrastructure also support self-taxation policies. There are no parallel associations in the models for “taxing others.”
- Even after the most costly disaster in New Jersey history, the New Jersey public deeply opposes tax increases—especially gasoline taxes—yet still want better infrastructure.

Policy Recommendations

New Jersey residents are loath to levy tax increases to improve infrastructure resilience. However, it is possible that more specific commitments on how revenue would be spent would generate greater insight and support for tax increases. Future research should explore this as well as the attitudinal disconnect between supporting improved infrastructure without a way to pay for it.

About the Authors

Robert B. Noland is Professor of Transportation Planning and Policy at the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center at Rutgers University, Marc D. Weiner is Associate Research Professor and Survey Director for the Center, and Michael R. Greenberg is Distinguished Professor and Associate Dean of the Faculty at the Bloustein School for Planning and Public Policy at Rutgers University.

To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at transweb.sjsu.edu/project/1243.html