Transportation system must balance freedom, security

By Sen. Ted Stevens (R-Alaska)

Last week, my wife, Catherine, and I participated in the Freedom Walk sponsored by the Department of Defense. It was a moving experience and a great reminder of the courage and heroism many Americans displayed the morning of Sept. 11, 2001.

The attacks of Sept. 11 changed our country forever. Americans quickly adapted to our new reality and took steps to protect both our democracy and our economy.

On Sept. 11, the terrorists breached our transportation security system, turning our commercial airliners into weapons. In the weeks after the attacks, those of us in Congress worked quickly to enact legislation that addressed these security failures.

With the president's signature, the rules of air travel in the United States began to change rapidly. The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) is still one of the newest agencies in our government, but it has already done much to protect the traveling public. However, more work remains.

I agree with Homeland Security Secretary Michael Chertoff's philosophy: In the process of becoming a secure state, the United States must not become a security state. Our goal is to seek a balance between security and individual liberties while ensuring the free flow of commerce. By employing a risk-based approach in allocating resources, our nation can substantially reduce the vulnerability of our transportation system.

Securing our domestic transportation system is a complicated task, and this complexity is compounded by the fact that one size does not always fit all. For example, Alaskans use airplanes the way many in the lower 48 use buses and taxis. Our rural village airports require a vastly different security model than large metropolitan airports, and yet, for our national transportation system to work efficiently, the two must coexist seamlessly.

Since its creation, the TSA has focused its resources predominantly — and justly — on securing commercial aviation. To that end, the agency has instituted a number of policies and procedures that have restored public confidence. But there is significant room for improvement.

There is a limit to what a human screener can detect. The TSA needs to deploy technologies that will screen airline passengers and baggage with more accuracy and efficiency. And systems are needed that will pinpoint legitimate threats while streamlining the security process for the vast majority of travelers who are on business trips or just trying to get home.

In addition, the TSA should focus on securing non-aviation modes of transportation. In July, terrorists targeted London's bus and subway systems. Those bombings highlighted the vulnerability of our own open transportation systems.

Moving forward, the TSA must assess and set priorities for critical transportation assets, such as our seaports and rail systems, and determine their vulnerabilities. Our economy relies upon the free flow of goods, and these essential facilities must be given increased attention.

While securing all modes of domestic transportation, steps should be taken to ensure that our requirements are not disproportionately and unnecessarily onerous. The challenge is daunting, but if approached wisely the vulnerabilities of our critical transportation assets will be reduced and loss of life or disruption of interstate commerce prevented.

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The Senate Commerce Committee will hold a series of hearings in the coming weeks focusing on each mode of transportation — from air and rail to truck and pipeline. Sen. Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) and I plan to ask our members to mark up legislation later this fall and, working together on a bipartisan basis, produce the legislation needed to achieve these goals.

There is no single fix when it comes to securing our domestic transportation systems. But by utilizing a combination of intelligence, technology and common sense, our security processes will be more effective and efficient.

Stevens is chairman of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation.