

Gates is hungry for food research

Microsoft chief seeks to improve crops for developing world

BY HOWARD SCHNEIDER

After years that have seen riots over rice shortages in Asia and record low world reserves of staple crops such as wheat, software-billionaire-turned-philanthropist Bill Gates argues that there is a simple solution.

Grow more food.

In a new push for the Gates Foundation, the Microsoft chairman is focusing on basic research on crops such as cassava that hold little interest for the world's agriculture multinationals but which are important for family farmers in some developing nations.

With productivity gains leveling off for major crops, such as soybeans and corn, Gates — in an annual review of the foundation's work — said that boosting the productivity of small farms may be key to a new "green revolution."

"The speed and productivity increases should rival that period," he said in a recent interview, referring to the decades since the 1960s when the development of high-yielding hybrid crops, better pest and land management, and other advances led to plentiful supplies and falling prices of food staples.

That era may be at an end, some food analysts said. Rising demand, slowing technological advances and limits on the availability of arable land may usher in an era of higher and more volatile prices, they said.

The effect has been episodic. After rising to record levels in 2010, for example, food prices have moderated and are expected by the World Bank to fall this year.

But the result can still be devastating to poor countries. This has led banks, government aid agencies and nongovernmental organizations to focus on finding ways to make poorer nations more self-sufficient in food production and less dependent on the ups and downs of world grain markets and weather patterns.

Unlike the time-consuming methods once needed to create hybrid crops, Gates said, DNA sequencing should accelerate scientists' ability to, for example, identify the genes that make cassava resistant to viruses.

Gates and others have urged the world's major economic powers to commit more money to the type of basic research needed to fund the breakthrough science that would expand production of crops such as cassava, sorghum and millet — second-tier plants that farmers in Africa in particular turn to when other, typically imported food becomes too expensive.

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Hill unlikely to act soon on transportation bill

LaHood says partisan divide hampers action on long-term funding

BY ASHLEY HALSEY III

With Congress riven by partisan politics and facing a truncated election-year schedule, the chances are slim that it will pass a long-awaited bill to fund the nation's highways, mass transit and ports, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Wednesday.

LaHood's gloomy forecast came two days before House Republicans are expected to begin circulating their five-year transportation blueprint, a \$260 billion bill that may be introduced as early as next week.

In spanning five years, the House proposal already is at odds with a two-year Senate plan that cleared a committee last year. It will include far-reaching reforms to the federal transportation bu-

reaucacy while transferring significant authority over spending decisions to the states.

"I believe we'll probably have to wait until next year to get to a surface transportation bill because of the huge differences," LaHood told a conference of transportation experts meeting in Washington. "Given the politics, the number of days that remain, the differences between what the Senate and the House are looking at, I think it's very unlikely that we'll have a surface transportation bill during this year."

The certainty of long-term funding is considered essential by federal and state planners charged with launching long-term projects. Yet Congress has proved itself incapable of agreeing on the critical surface transportation funding bill. The last long-term bill expired almost three years ago and transportation planners have been hamstrung by eight short-extensions.

Though transportation is

eclipsed in the budget debate by the deficit, defense spending and entitlement programs, alarms have been raised for more than a decade about the impact that a deteriorating transportation infrastructure will have on the nation's long-term economic health.

The American Society of Civil Engineers has estimated that an investment of \$1.7 trillion is needed between now and 2020 to rebuild roads, bridges, water lines, sewage systems and dams that are reaching the end of their planned life cycles. The Urban Institute puts the price tag at \$2 trillion.

A 2010 report by 80 experts led by former transportation secretaries Norman Y. Mineta and Samuel K. Skinner called for an annual investment of \$262 billion.

Even when Democrats had command of the House and Senate, they weren't able to produce a long-term surface transportation bill because revenue from the federal gas tax no longer provides the robust funding levels that were

used to launch the interstate highway system 60 years ago.

LaHood sat on a panel at the Transportation Research Board's annual meeting Wednesday with five former transportation secretaries, and none of them provided a ready solution for revitalizing the Highway Trust Fund, which is supported by the federal gasoline tax of 18.4 cents per gallon.

"The Department of Transportation has become a bank, managing trust funds," said Andrew H. Card Jr., who served as transportation secretary during the administration of George H.W. Bush. "And many of those trust fund balances aren't large enough to meet the expectations of the owners of the trust."

The owners of the trust, U.S. taxpayers, have to realize they can't have everything they want, he said.

"We have not had the courage to really argue about what the basic needs of transportation are," Card said. "This is the competitive needs of the nation, not the need

for an off-ramp to a supermarket."

Alan Boyd, who led the formation of the Transportation Department during Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, put it more bluntly.

"So many of my fellow Americans want to have good roads, good bridges, but they don't want to pay for them," Boyd said. "They want somebody else to pay for them. No new taxes."

President Obama raised the infrastructure issue in his State of the Union address on Tuesday, disappointing some transportation experts who had hoped for something more specific than the suggestion that money saved by winding down wars could be spent on infrastructure.

"So much of America needs to be rebuilt," the president said. "We've got crumbling roads and bridges. There's never been a better time to build, especially since the construction industry was one of the hardest-hit when the housing bubble burst."

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NASA VIA REUTERS

As seen from the final frontier

This image of Earth was taken by the Visible Infrared Imager Radiometer Suite (VIIRS) aboard NASA's newest Earth-observing satellite, Suomi NPP. This composite uses a number of swaths of Earth's surface taken Jan. 4. The image combines four passes of the satellite over the planet, which are then digitized to look like a single photo taken from about 1,200 miles above the point at 20 degrees north and 100 degrees west. VIIRS captured light in four wave lengths, most of which were in the visible spectrum, and added them together.

German chancellor urges greater unity

Merkel signals that Europe will do whatever it takes to save euro

BY JOHN DANISZEWSKI AND NIKO PRICE

DAVOS, SWITZERLAND — German Chancellor Angela Merkel insisted Wednesday that Europe will remain an economic power only if it deepens the integration that has caused it so many problems. Without that, she warned the global elite gathered in a Swiss ski resort, Europe will remain little more than a pleasant vacation destination.

The tone of Merkel's keynote address was not dramatically different from her measured norm, but it was positive enough to feed an emerging feeling among European power brokers that Germany — and hence Europe — is finally becoming convinced that it needs to do whatever it takes to save the euro from collapse.

"The message is that we are ready for more commitment. We are no longer making excuses," Merkel said. If Europe doesn't integrate further, she said, "we will remain an interesting holiday destination for a long time, but we won't be able to produce prosperity for the people in Europe anymore."

Merkel pledged to do what is necessary to protect the euro from collapse and said greater European unity is needed to spark job creation and growth. But she poured cold water on calls for Europe to ratchet up the financial firepower of its safety net for failing economies.

Germany is at the center of any

rescue plan because it has the deepest pockets in Europe. And Europe is at the center of the global outlook because many fear a collapse of the euro could drag large parts of the world back into recession.

For months, Germany has argued that indebted countries must cut their budgets to the bone, and that their people must become poorer, in exchange for help in reducing their debt loads. But many say that will do little good if that very austerity causes growth to evaporate, making countries unable to pay back the debt that remains.

George Soros, the philanthropist and former financier, called Germany a task master imposing a strict anti-inflationary viewpoint on the rest of the continent. He said weaker euro-zone countries have been "relegated to the status of third-world countries" having to pay back debts in a foreign currency.

"The problem is that the austerity that Germany wants will push Europe into a deflationary death spiral. . . . The economy will contract, and tax revenues will fall. So the debt burden . . . will actually rise, requiring further budget cuts and setting in motion a vicious cycle."

In the past month, business leaders and academics say they have become increasingly confident that Germany — once its back is against the wall — will go along with measures to boost growth, and possibly save Europe from deeper crisis.

"We are starting to see signs of a shift in sentiment toward Europe," said Baudouin Prot, chief executive of French bank BNP Paribas.

— Associated Press

Study: Close or help some public schools, add charters

SCHOOLS FROM A1

said that their work looks at both school sectors objectively.

The study could also eventually serve as the basis for another major round of traditional public school closures, a politically and emotionally bruising process last undertaken by then-Chancellor Michelle A. Rhee during Mayor Adrian M. Fenty's administration. Although traditional public school enrollment has leveled off at about 46,000 after decades of decline, the system still has an excess of capacity. More than 40 schools have 300 or fewer students, many of them struggling academically.

City officials said that decisions about any major restructuring will not be made for at least a year and only after close consultation with affected communities.

Gray (D) said Wednesday that there is no basis for concerns that he will hand the city school system over to charter schools, especially given the hundreds of millions of dollars the District has invested in renovating and rebuilding traditional school campuses.

"It's ludicrous," he said. "I believe very strongly in both sectors, and I'm looking for the best education solutions."

DeShawn Wright, the deputy mayor for education, said the plan is to meet with Chancellor Kaya Henderson, who heads the school system, and charter school leaders to map out a scenario for meeting the needs of underserved neighborhoods.

Matching supply and demand

A consulting firm hired by the District identified 10 neighborhood clusters as having the greatest need for seats in high-performing schools.

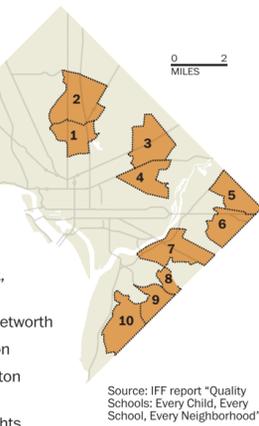
NEIGHBORHOOD CLUSTER

- 1 Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, Pleasant Plains and Park View
- 2 Brightwood Park, Crestwood and Petworth
- 3 Brookland, Brentwood and Langdon
- 4 Ivy City, Trinidad and Carver Langston
- 5 Deanwood, Burrville, Grant Park, Lincoln Heights and Fairmont Heights
- 6 Capitol View, Marshall Heights and Benning Heights
- 7 Twining, Fairlawn, Randle Highlands, Penn Branch, Fort Davis Park and Fort Dupont
- 8 Woodland/Fort Stanton, Garfield Heights and Knox Hill
- 9 Douglas and Shipley Terrace
- 10 Congress Heights, Bellevue and Washington Highlands and Bolling Air Force Base

THE WASHINGTON POST

The report is organized as a supply-and-demand analysis that divided the city into 39 groups of neighborhoods.

Using a formula based on standardized test score trends and projections to 2016, it separated eligible public schools into quartiles, or four performance tiers. Schools without adequate



Source: IFF report "Quality Schools: Every Child, Every Neighborhood"

test data were excluded from the study.

In schools designated Tier 1, anywhere from 60 to 100 percent of students tested at or above grade level and showed the steepest improvement curves.

Researchers then looked at student populations in each neighborhood cluster to determine

Statistical data from the new D.C. school study

The new IFF study of school location and performance in the District is the most detailed look at the city's public schools in several years. Some key points:

- 67 percent:** Proportion of children in traditional public schools living in households with income at or below 185 percent of U.S. poverty guidelines.
- 75 percent:** Proportion of public charter school children living at or below 185 percent of poverty.
- 67 percent:** African American enrollment in traditional public schools.
- 87 percent:** African American enrollment in public charter schools.
- 2045:** The year 75 percent of D.C. students will test at grade level in math if trends hold.
- 2075:** The year 75 percent of D.C. students will reach grade level in reading if trends hold.

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which communities had the largest shortage of seats in top-tier schools.

The biggest shortage — about 27,000 seats — is concentrated within 10 neighborhood clusters, most of them south and east of the Anacostia River in wards 7 and 8 and others cutting across portions of wards 1 and 5 in Northeast and Northwest Washington. More than half of the shortfall is for kindergarten through fifth grade.

The bulk of IFF's findings are not new, but they place in bolder relief than ever the dearth of good schools in the city's poorest neighborhoods. Of the 45 schools assessed by IFF as Tier 1, just six are in wards 7 and 8. All are public charter schools. Of the 39 schools in Tier 4 — the lowest rating — 22 are in wards 7 and 8. Eighteen are traditional public schools; four are public charters.

Among the areas identified by

IFF as having the greatest need is the group of Ward 8 neighborhoods that includes Congress Heights, Bellevue, Washington Highlands and Bolling Air Force Base. Only two of the 14 schools studied in those neighborhoods are in Tier 1, and they are both charters: Achievement Prep and Friendship Tech Prep. The firm recommended attempting to turn around or close all four traditional public schools in Tier 4 — Simon, Patterson, Terrell-McGogney and Ferebee-Hope elementary — and closing two bottom-rung charter schools, Center City Congress Heights (pre-K to 8) and Imagine Southeast (pre-K to 5). It also suggested investing more resources into improving a Tier 2 charter, Friendship Southeast elementary.

The report says that any closures of traditional public schools should be offset by new charters or building new traditional schools.

Most of the other surveys of the 10 critical neighborhood clusters follow the pattern. In all, 38 traditional public schools and three charter schools were recommended for turnaround or closure.

In the report, IFF urges the city to consider expanding the footprint of charter schools in the 10 targeted neighborhood clusters. It calls for the D.C. Public Charter School Board to authorize about 6,500 new charter seats (current enrollment is about 32,000). It also recommends that the board "actively recruit the highest performing charter school operators and ask them to replicate their performing school model" in the top 10 clusters, using former public school buildings as incentives.

It's virtually certain that city officials will tinker with IFF's recommendations. The report lists for turnaround or possible closure, for example, schools that have received tens of millions of dollars in capital investment, including the new H.D. Woodson High School in Ward 7.

Wright said the IFF study would be just the beginning of a lengthy review requiring "lifting the hood" over each underserved area for a close look at its needs.

"This is complicated work," he said, "and it's got to be done on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis."

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On postlocal, find a link to a detailed report on the state of the District's public schools.