

December 22, 2011

Reauthorization, Budget, & Appropriations Topped Transportation News in 2011

Congress' debate of a multiyear highway and transit reauthorization bill dominated the surface transportation policy sector's headlines in 2011 for the second straight year and drew the greatest interest among AASHTO Journal readers. During a year in which Republicans took control of the House of Representatives with an austere fiscal agenda, budget and appropriations stories were also highly consumed leading up to the Fiscal Year 2012 highway obligation limit being cut almost \$2 billion after House leaders originally called for a dramatic one-third reduction in federal surface transportation investment.

The AASHTO Journal reviewed 35 most-read articles this year (measured by unique pageviews) to determine 2011's top 10 transportation news topics most popular with our readers:

1. Reauthorization: Efforts to pass a new federal surface transportation authorization bill moved slowly ahead this year, resulting in two short-term extensions of the 2005 highway and transit law known as "SAFETEA-LU," which expired Sept. 30, 2009. AJ readers put 18 reauthorization stories in the top 35 this year.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica, R-Florida, began the year [holding field hearings across the country](#) to prepare for drafting reauthorization legislation. U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood [asserted in January](#) that he was confident a multiyear bill could be passed by Congress and signed into law before the congressional summer recess began in August. The Obama administration [proposed in February a \\$556 billion, six-year reauthorization bill](#) but didn't identify any means of paying for it. February ended in uncertainty with [only a week left until federal appropriations and authorization were set to expire](#).

President Barack Obama [signed legislation in early March](#) extending highway and transit programs for seven months after the [House](#) and [Senate](#) passed the seventh SAFETEA-LU extension.

The Senate Finance Committee [weighed several options in May](#) to pay for a long-term reauthorization, and that same month the bipartisan leadership of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee [released the outline of draft legislation](#) ("Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century") that would reauthorize the nation's surface transportation system for six years at a level of \$339 billion.

House T&I Committee Republicans responded in July by unveiling [a six-year, \\$230 billion reauthorization proposal](#), which was immediately objected to by Democratic committee leaders for cutting highway and transit investment by a third. Senate Democrats also [objected to the low funding amount proposed](#). Senate Environment and Public Works Committee leaders produced in late July [a two-year, \\$109 billion reauthorization bill outline and held a hearing](#) at which Nevada Transportation Director Susan Martinovich testified as then-president of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

After summer recess, Congress returned in September and [approved a six-month surface transportation extension](#) valid until March 31, 2012 -- the eighth SAFETEA-LU extension. Mica told reporters in October that his long-term reauthorization bill [would now maintain current funding levels](#) over six years after he was given permission from House Republican leadership to seek additional revenue.

House Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, [pledged in early November](#) to move a multiyear reauthorization bill by year's end packaged with expanded domestic energy production. During the following week, the Senate EPW Committee [unanimously approved its two-year highway reauthorization legislation](#) after [releasing the measure's full text](#). Two other Senate committees with jurisdiction over reauthorization (Finance and Banking, Housing, & Urban Affairs) did not mark up their sections this year, and the question of how to generate additional revenue to offset the bill's costs remains the key undetermined provision.

The year concluded in December with [the House of Representatives pushing back its reauthorization work until 2012](#) and the Senate Commerce, Science, & Transportation Committee approving four safety, freight, and research components that will be folded into the portion passed earlier by the EPW Committee.

2. Budget & Appropriations: Nine budget and appropriations stories ranked in the top 35 most-read AJ articles this year. With Republicans now in control of the House and Obama announcing his opposition, congressional leaders announced in January that earmarks would be banned. The Congressional Research Service noted in a report that the earmark ban [could change how highway and transit dollars are allocated](#). This Congress also began with the House [approving a rules change](#) that could lead to reduced highway and transit investment.

In early February, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Harold Rogers, R-Kentucky, [outlined a plan to reduce budget authority](#) that governs funding for transportation and housing programs by \$11.5 billion, a 17% cut from present levels. A week later, the House Appropriations Committee released a continuing resolution that would [cut transportation investment](#).

Obama said in April that the nation [shouldn't sacrifice important infrastructure projects](#) while reducing the deficit. The president's remarks came two weeks after the House Budget Committee proposed [a 30% reduction for transportation in FY 2012](#) and a week after transportation [suffered significant spending cuts](#) in the final FY 2011 appropriations measure passed by Congress.

Rogers set appropriations bill allocation amounts in May that would reduce transportation and housing spending [more than \\$1 billion below FY 2008 levels](#). In the final transportation and housing appropriations legislation enacted in November, cuts were less drastic but Congress still [trimmed the highway obligation limit by almost \\$2 billion](#) and zeroed out federal support for high-speed and intercity passenger rail projects.

3. Regulatory Reform: The U.S. Department of Transportation submitted to the White House in June a "[Preliminary Plan for Retrospective Review and Analysis of Existing Rules](#)," which focuses on amending 70 regulations. The plan was prepared in response to an executive order issued in January by Obama, in which he challenged agencies across the federal government to review rules already on the books and remove those that are out of date, unnecessary, excessively burdensome, or in conflict with other rules.

4. Bike Routes: AASHTO and the Adventure Cycling Association announced in May that AASHTO's Special Committee on U.S. Route Numbering approved six new U.S. Bicycle Routes: USBR 1 in Maine and New Hampshire; USBR 20 in Michigan; and USBR 8, 87, 95, and 97 in Alaska -- [the first national bike routes to be established since 1982](#).

5. Traffic Safety: Dangerous risks involved when motor vehicles roll through red lights while making right turns were featured in a video released in April by the Traffic Safety Coalition. The video, "[Stop On Red -- It's the Law](#)," uses actual red-light-running crash footage and close calls with pedestrians to remind drivers why a complete stop on red is always necessary before turning. In the video, the coalition advocates for more cities to install what it dubs "safety cameras" -- devices that photograph red-light runners so vehicle owners can be fined.

6. Project Delivery: It takes too long to get things done using federal transportation dollars, [AASHTO Executive Director John Horsley told U.S. Department of Transportation officials](#) during a public meeting in March in Washington. In advance of the meeting, AASHTO staff developed 19 recommendations on regulatory changes that the association recommends to speed up project delivery.

7. Job Creation: Two days after the Senate voted against proceeding to a debate on Obama's \$447 billion American Jobs Act, [the president and Boehner discussed transportation and infrastructure](#) during a phone call in mid-October. Obama received 50 senators' votes in favor of proceeding to debate the American Jobs Act, short of the 60 needed; 49 senators, including all Republicans, voted to block the measure from advancing. The legislation, [S 1660](#), would appropriate \$50 billion for transportation projects and \$10 billion to capitalize a national infrastructure bank.

8. Bridge Closure: Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels in September [ordered the immediate closure of the Sherman Minton Bridge](#), which carries Interstate 64 over the Ohio River between New Albany, Indiana, and Louisville, Kentucky. Indiana and Kentucky transportation officials were informed of the discovery Sept. 8 of a concerning crack in the critical load-carrying element of the bridge. The bridge remains closed until repairs are completed in Spring 2012.

9. Livability: An April report from the Federal Highway Administration that focuses on the agency's implementation of livability principles found that [states are making significant strides incorporating those principles](#) into their policy and community planning efforts.

10. Highway Trust Fund: The Highway Trust Fund's Highway Account might be unable to meet obligations in a timely manner sometime during Fiscal Year 2012 and the Transit Account will run dry sometime during FY 2013, [the Congressional Budget Office projected](#) in a report released in January. (More recent projections bumped back the Transit Account's insolvency date to FY 2014.) Congress did not take any actions this year to address the issue.

Questions regarding this article may be directed to editor@ashtojournal.org.