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FAA, highway bills to move in 2012

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Fresh off his win on the payroll tax break, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said Friday he plans to prioritize aviation and highway legislation in 2012.

He sold both bills as job-creators — the Federal Aviation Administration bill would create “a couple hundred thousand” jobs, he said, and the highway/transit measure “will create jobs, not just save jobs.”

Reid said the FAA bill shouldn't be distracted by other issues, such as the controversial change in how union elections are calculated that has stalled action for months.

“We have to get this done and forget about all the extraneous stuff and deal with FAA,” he said.

The bill has languished since April because of an impasse over repealing a 2010 National Mediation Board ruling that employees not voting in union elections would no longer be counted as a “no” vote. Reid and House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) are trying to work out the issue; House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) and others have said all other matters have been resolved and it's up to leaders to work out the labor dispute.

A D.C. appeals court recently ruled in favor of the new rules, but House T&I ranking member Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.) said this week the court decision won't factor into leaders' work on the bill.

Mica has hinted recently that, if necessary, another FAA extension could include policy changes that are atypical for short-term program extensions. Two relatively minor changes to a rural airport subsidy program that Mica included in a previous extension led to a two-week FAA shutdown this past summer as lawmakers traded barbs over about \$14 million in savings.

Reid also praised a two-year highway bill approved by the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

“Very conservative Jim Inhofe, quite progressive Barbara Boxer have come up with an arrangement to extend this for two years, a very, very good bill. I would hope that my colleagues don't play any games with this bill,” he said.

A recent 18-month extension of highway policies saved around a million jobs, Reid said.

Reid also slammed Congress for fighting over every last issue.

“People wonder why the approval rating of Congress is so low. I don't wonder. It seems that everything we've done this last year has been a knock-down, drag-out fight. There is no reason to do that,” he said.

The current FAA stopgap bill expires on Jan. 31, 2012. Highway and transit policy runs out two months later. With Congress reconvening in late January, a 23rd-straight stopgap bill for the FAA may be necessary due to the time-crunch, though leading transportation lawmakers have indicated once NMB is settled, an FAA bill could be put on the floor for a vote within a couple of days.

The House has only six legislative days in January; the Senate has seven.

Burgess Everett contributed to this report.

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