

## Obama to Congress: Pass a Clean Transportation Bill

Posted on Thursday September 1st by Eric Jaffe When Congress (initially) failed to extend the F.A.A.'s authorization last month it resulted in the immediate furlough of about 4,000 workers and the suspension of loads of construction projects. That's exactly what a job-conscious President Obama wants to avoid with the transportation authorization that's set to expire at the end of September, and he made the stakes perfectly clear to Congress yesterday in a speech at the White House:

If we allow the transportation bill to expire, over 4,000 workers will be immediately furloughed without pay. If it's delayed for just 10 days, it will lose nearly \$1 billion in highway funding — that's money we can never get back. And if it's delayed even longer, almost one million workers could lose their jobs over the course of the next year.

Now the prospects of Congress agreeing to a long-term bill before month's end are not exactly encouraging. The House has proposed a six-year, \$230 billion plan limited to revenue brought in to the Highway Trust Fund, while the Senate is leaning toward a two-year, \$109 billion plan that promises to find extra funding somewhere outside the trust. Though lawmakers technically have until September 30 to reconcile this gap, in reality — as Streetsblog DC points out — they only have 11 working days:

To add a sort of slapstick hilarity to the urgency of addressing these three major issues before the end of the month, Congress is taking off for another district work period September 23, making that the effective deadline for all of these actions. That gives members 11 work days to solve all of these problems (given that Congress is rarely in session on Mondays).

That reality appears to be sinking in. Senate leaders have stated their willingness to issue a clean extension of the bill, and House Transportation Chair John Mica, who initially balked at the idea, has come around too. After President Obama's speech Mica agreed to one — though just one — clean six-month extension.

Of course such an action just delays the problem. And it's distinctly possible the rest of the House won't go along for the ride. After all, there's still the lingering question of how much House anti-tax enthusiasts will oppose the federal gas tax, which would remain in place with a clean extension. If this is the kind of argument Congressional transportation leaders are dealing with —

The tax is the Obama agenda in microcosm: The program takes money from everyone [*sic*, only those who buy gas] to fund infrastructure projects, some environmentally friendly initiatives and treats union workers favorably. [*sic*, comma or parallel verb construction] It also shows the challenge he faces in selling a broader program of tax increases for stimulus spending. [*sic*, no gas tax increase is being considered] Explaining to Americans why paying 18.4 cents more for a gallon of gas is no easy feat. [*sic*, missing word and where to begin. — six more months isn't going to help them

## Obama Calls on Congress to Pass Federal Transportation Bill And Keep The FAA In Business

By Jim O'Grady | August 31, 2011 – 2:03 pm

(New York, NY – WNYC) President Obama says nearly a million American workers, many of them in construction, will be unemployed within a year if Congress delays passage of the federal transportation bill. The president spoke at a press conference in the Rose Garden at The White House, where he was joined by some of those workers.

“If we don’t extend this bill by the end of September, all of them will be out of a job because of politics in Washington, and that’s just not acceptable,” Obama said.

The House is proposing to renew the transportation bill at \$230 billion over six years. The Senate wants to spend \$109 billion over two years. The sides must be reconciled by September 30th to avoid interruption to building projects around the country.

“This bill provides funding for highway construction, bridge repair, mass transit systems and other essential systems that keep our people and our commerce moving quickly and safely,” Obama said.

The Senate bill would keep U.S. transportation spending at current levels. The House bill would constitute a 35% annual cut. Both bills are less than what the president has proposed: \$500 billion, with another \$53 billion for competitive high speed rail grants.

Petra Todorovich of the Regional Plan Association—a planning group covering New York, New Jersey and Connecticut—called the house bill “a brutal cut that will certainly be felt around the region in jobs and in the condition of our roads, bridges and transit systems.”

The president said if the transportation bill is allowed to expire, 4,000 workers will immediately be furloughed. He added that if Congress remains at an impasse ten days after that, \$1 billion in highway funds will be lost for good.

President Obama also called on Congress to extend authorization of the Federal Aviation Administration. When the House and Senate deadlocked on the issue in July, the FAA endured a partial shut down for 13 days. The move threw 4,000 agency employees out of work and interrupted hundreds of airport construction projects. Thousands of construction workers around the U.S. lost two weeks on the job and the the federal government was not able to collect more than \$350 million in taxes on airline tickets.

The president also proposed an initiative aiming at cutting waste in transportation spending and giving states greater control in choosing projects.

“No more bridges to nowhere,” he said. “No more projects that are simply funded because of somebody pulling strings.”

He said that at the urging of his Jobs Council, he'd be directing federal agencies to identify high priority infrastructure projects that are already funded and then “expedite permitting decisions and reviews necessary to get construction underway more quickly while still protecting, safety, public health and the environment.”

US DOT secretary Ray LaHood, who joined the president at the podium, continued the theme of linking transportation to jobs on his blog: “It’s time to have a serious conversation in Congress about making smart investments while interest rates are at historical lows and unemployment is high.” The president wants to publicly have that conversation on Tuesday, September 7th, when he’s requested a joint session of Congress to lay out his job creation plan.

Today, Obama said such spending was urgent not only to create jobs but to stop from falling behind countries that are spending at a healthy clip on roads, railways, mass transit and airports. He said that ten years ago, U.S. infrastructure ranked sixth globally — but now ranks 23rd.

“We invest half of much in our infrastructure as we did fifty years ago with more than one-and-a-half the number of people,” he said. “Everybody can see the consequences. That’s unacceptable for a country that has always dreamed big and built big, from the transcontinental railroads to the interstate highway system.”

**UPDATE: 4:07PM:** Congressman John Mica, the Florida republican who chairs the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, released a statement about the president’s speech. “In the interest of getting Americans back to work and moving vital transportation legislation, Republicans are committed to working with the President and Congressional Democrats,” he said, before blaming Democrats for the funding stalemate. “During their control, they neglected aviation legislation for more than four years and left major transportation legislation in the ditch for more than a year.”

Mica has been vocal about wanting a six-year authorization bill, and floated one last month. But it sounds like he’s willing to make concessions. “I will agree to one additional highway program extension,” his statement read, “this being the eighth of the overdue transportation reauthorization.”

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## President Obama Pushes Congress For a Clean Extension of Transpo Bill

by [Tanya Snyder](#) on August 31, 2011

President Obama exhorted Congress to pass a clean extension of the transportation bill, to keep people, like some of those by his side, at work.

"I'm calling on Congress, as soon as they come back, to pass a clean extension of the surface transportation bill," President Barack Obama said from the Rose Garden this morning. "This bill provides funding for highway construction, bridge repair, mass transit systems, and other essential projects that keep our people and our commerce moving quickly and safely. And for construction workers and their families across the country, it represents the difference between making ends meet and not making ends meet."

While his calls for an extension of the current bill are increasingly in line with the growing realization that there is no possible way of passing a new bill before the September 30 extension, Obama did look beyond the immediate fix. "When Congress is back next week, in addition to passing these clean extensions to prevent any halt on existing work, we're going to have to have a serious conversation in this country about making real, lasting investments in our infrastructure — from better ports to a smarter electric grid, from high-speed internet to high-speed rail."

Obama didn't specify how long of an extension he was seeking.

The president's speech, first announced yesterday, made a push not only to put people back to work, but to "reform the way transportation money is invested, to eliminate waste, to give states more control over the projects that are right for them, and to make sure that we're getting better results for the money that we spend."

We need to stop funding projects based on whose districts they're in and start funding them based on how much good they're going to be doing for the American people. No more bridges to nowhere, no more projects that are simply funded because of somebody pulling strings. We need to do this all in a way that gets the private sector more involved. That's how we're going to put construction workers back to work right now, doing the work that America needs done, not just to boost our economy this year but for the next 20 years.

That focus on performance is good news for transportation reformers who have been demanding that the next reauthorization spend limited transportation dollars more wisely, using a cost-benefit analysis and other evaluative tools to determine whether a given project meets national and regional transportation goals. Obama's mention of long-term

economic growth, in addition to short-term job creation, is also a welcome change to those who have pushed politicians, including the president, to take the long view.

“The Interstate system created a lot of jobs, but no one talks now about how many jobs it created from constructing it,” Joshua Schank, CEO of the Eno Transportation Foundation, told Streetsblog last month. “People talk about the impact it had on the economy.”

President Obama also said that he had directed some federal agencies to identify high-priority construction projects that are already funded but could use a jump-start with expedited permitting decisions and reviews “while still protecting safety, public health, and the environment.”

During his remarks, the president was flanked by Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka and Chamber of Commerce Chief Operating Officer David Chavern.

His mention of Congress’ inability to pass a new FAA bill highlighted another reason why significant action on a new bill will be impossible before the end of this month: Congress’ most recent extension of the aviation reauthorization expires first, and the chambers will busy themselves fighting over a few million aviation dollars before the September 16 deadline for that bill, before they can get around to arguing about surface transportation.

If the bill is delayed just 10 days, the country would lose over \$1 billion in transportation funding — “That’s money we can never get back,” Obama said.

## Obama to urge approval of stop-gap air, road bills

By John Crawley

WASHINGTON | Wed Aug 31, 2011 5:52am EDT

(Reuters) - U.S. President Barack Obama will urge Congress on Wednesday to approve stop-gap aviation and transportation infrastructure legislation to temporarily maintain funding for airport and road construction projects and preserve jobs in a tough economy.

Obama wants Congress not to repeat the type of partisan fight over temporary funding that shut down airport construction programs for two weeks in July. That disruption also resulted in losing \$400 million in aviation-related tax revenue that helps pay for those programs.

U.S. transportation spending, especially the tens of billions of dollars spent on roads annually, is a key driver of economic activity and employment.

A White House official, who did not want to speak for attribution ahead of Obama's Rose Garden remarks, said on Tuesday the president would urge lawmakers to pass "clean extensions" of bills covering Federal Aviation Administration airport programs and Transportation Department highway and transit accounts.

That means legislation should cover a set period of time without conditions. Those types of extensions generally last one to six months.

Ticket taxes underwrite FAA spending on airport construction, while gasoline taxes pay for highway and transit upgrades.

Without extensions, the law authorizing the 7.5 percent aviation ticket tax will expire on September 16 while the one allowing the federal gasoline tax of 18.4 cents per gallon will end on September 30.

Temporary bills authorizing continued federal collection of tax revenues for aviation and highway programs are necessary until Congress approves permanent legislation. The last multiyear FAA bill expired in 2007 while the previous transportation plan ended in September 2009.

Temporary extensions normally generate little, if any, notice in Congress. But Republicans, especially in the House of Representatives, attached a rider to the July FAA funding extension that triggered a fight with the Senate.

There is some concern among congressional Democrats that Republicans will try again to add spending restraints or other proposals to one or both of the transportation-related bills, especially the one covering gas taxes.

Related lobbying kicked into gear on Tuesday with transportation groups urging their members to contact lawmakers in support of "clean extensions."

"You look at the extent to which FAA caught everyone by surprise. I don't think we can take anything for granted as we approach the transportation (highway) bill," said Peter Nonis, congressional relations manager for AAA, the nationwide motorist services group with 51 million members in the United States and Canada.