



Official Government Photo of John Mica

Transportation Nation's Todd Zwillich spoke with Republican John Mica, Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, about rumors of raiding the Highway Trust Fund, stretching infrastructure money farther, and why the new chairman is so optimistic he can get a transportation bill passed in a partisan congress.

"The Highway Trust Fund will remain the purview of the Transportation Committee and can't be used for other uses."

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TRANSCRIPT:

Todd Zwillich: Thank You Mr. Mica. With the new rules coming in with the new Congress, you have heard Democrats ... warning that the Highway Trust Fund will be raided under the new budgetary rules that were passed by Republicans... Is that a real fear?

Congressman John Mica: Well I think what was put in place were some good protective measures. Now I also was able to get some clarification which we did in a colloquy that the funds within the Highway Trust Fund will remain the purview of the Transportation Committee and can't be used for other uses. So we can make those obligations.

The concern of the more conservative congress and the American people was spending that was out of control. And we actually had rules that forced spending of revenue above the Trust Fund revenues and I don't think that's right either.

So I feel pretty comfortable that we can work, again, with the rules that are passed and protect the funds for transportation not playing games or using it as offsets for other spending.

On the gas tax: "Well it's going to go down whether we like it or not. Fewer people are using gasoline. We have alternative fuels. The revenue will go down. The rate remains the same. It's 18.4 cents per gallon." But revenues will go down.

TZ: So it's fair to say overall highway spending is probably going to go down, because general revenues will not be spent in that way? And Trust Fund money, you think, will basically stay the same?

JM: Well again, each question on general revenue has to come before the whole Congress. But what the T&I committee won't be able to do is force levels over and above the Trust Fund levels. So I think that's a reasonable approach. And each one would have to be considered separately rather than in one omnibus transportation authorization that forces higher levels of spending than money we have coming in. So, prudent from one standpoint and it did raise some concerns, but it's something I think we can live with.

Now our challenge is taking diminishing revenues and making them go further. But I think we can do that by speeding up some of the process, cutting red tape and leveraging some of the funds we have better.

"What we will be looking at in the next authorization bill are alternate means of financing so that the revenues can be stabilized. We'll look at how to do more, as I said, with less. Maybe cutting some of the frill programs. And giving states more discretion. And then prioritizing how we spend federal money."

TZ: [Ways and Means committee] Chairman Dave Camp says that there are Republicans who would like to see the gas tax go down. Do you think that's a possibility?

JM: Well it's going to go down whether we like it or not. Fewer people are using gasoline. We have alternative fuels. The revenue will go down. The rate remains the same. It's 18.4 cents per gallon.

TZ: Will the rate go down?

JM: I think it's almost impossible to drop the rate. But what we will be looking at in the next authorization bill are alternate means of financing so that the revenues can be stabilized. We'll look at how to do more, as I said, with less. Maybe cutting some of the frill programs. And giving states more discretion. And then prioritizing how we spend federal money.

It really should be for federal projects or projects of national commercial, or national interest that we pass federal legislation and put federal money in if you get the point.

“We also need a long-term policy so the federal government can be a stable partner with states. They’ll know what the revenue is. We won’t just be doing short term paving and sidewalk projects. We’ll be doing long term investment in infrastructure.”

TZ: What do you think the chances are of a big transportation reauthorization bill getting accomplished in this partisan congress?

JM: Oh, I think excellent. I think the Obama administration made a grave mistake killing a six-year bill. They probably wouldn’t have taken the beating at the poll if people were working, and the highest rate of unemployment is in the construction industry. Also they didn’t speed up the stimulus process, most of that money is still, about 50 percent of it, left in the pipeline.

So we can learn a lesson, and Republicans should, that we need to speed up the process, cut red tape. We also need a long-term policy so the federal government can be a stable partner with states. They’ll know what the revenue is. We won’t just be doing short term paving and sidewalk projects. We’ll be doing long term investment in infrastructure.

TZ: [Outgoing Transportation Committee] Chair Jim Oberstar went for an ambitious \$450 billion bill. Is the key to your success a less ambitious bill? (Hear Transportation Nation’s exit interview with Oberstar [here](#)).

JM: Some of the intent in raising that money was to do it with an increase in the gas tax, which was very unpopular then, even more unpopular now. So what I have to look at is taking the money we have, looking at ways we can leverage it, looking at ways we can speed up the process and save money. So maybe I can come up with a net worth of even more with some creative things like defining public-private partnerships and looking, again, at some programs that have been successful and some that have billions of dollars sitting that aren’t successful and make them successful.

“I hope we can change the dynamics. I believe, again, there are billions and billions of dollars just sitting around.”

TZ: I had a conversation with Norm Mineta a couple of weeks ago ... his assessment of infrastructure now is that ... for the next few years the nation in terms of transportation infrastructure will be in a state of maintenance. We can’t do more than maintenance. Any kind of overall innovation is just not going to be possible. Do you agree with that assessment?

JM: Well if we proceed the terms we have in the past, that’s probably true. But I hope we can change the dynamics. I believe, again, there are billions and billions of dollars just sitting around. I just had a meeting with Virginia officials they named three major projects that they can’t get the paperwork moving on that they are ready to go forward on. So sometimes it’s not even a question of having more money it’s the money in the pipeline they can’t get out.

I have half of the 63 billion still unspent in the stimulus infrastructure. Half of 63 is at least 30 billion dollars sitting there.



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[Home](#) > Mica Plans Field Hearings on Surface Transport Bill

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New T&I chief wants regional input before drafting next multi-year bill

John D. Boyd

Source:

The Journal of Commerce Online

Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., who chairs the Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, intends to start a process in February that can help his panel craft a new multi-year surface transportation bill.

Mica told The Journal of Commerce that beginning on or around Feb. 18 he plans to hold field hearings or "listening sessions" outside of Washington to get more input from local and regional officials on what should be in the next transportation legislation.

He also said his immediate top priority will be to complete legislation to reauthorize the Federal Aviation Administration. Congress has passed 17 FAA extensions pending passage of a new aviation bill, "so I've got to get that out first," he said.

"But running parallel will be the surface and transit bill," said Mica. "The first thing I plan to do is a series of hearings around the country, and listening sessions, and we're going to start that probably about the 18th of February."

Currently, Highway Trust Fund and related programs are continuing under short-term extensions by Congress. The Obama administration is expected to offer its own surface transportation proposals early this year, Mica will take the lead in crafting a Republican bill in the House and would need to work with a Democratic Senate to get a final bill.

While he did not give a target period for getting a bill through his committee or the House, Mica has previously said he wants to move legislation as early as possible in 2011 to prevent major initiatives getting caught up in the 2012 presidential election campaign.

The new T&I chairman wants to retool some current surface transportation programs to save money, speed up projects to release funds already approved, spur greater use of

infrastructure loans from existing federal government programs and give more incentives to private firms to invest in transportation projects.

However, he said that "rather than me scribble out my ideas ... we're going to be listening; we're going to be soliciting good ideas" from others. "So we're going to take the effort on the road." The T&I committee has not yet said how many of those field sessions will take place or where they will be held.

From that process, Mica said, "I hope to have a whole list of new financing ideas and how we can cut some of the red tape, learning from people first-hand and also educating members" of the committee.

Mica said 19 of the T&I committee's 33 members are new in that role, "so we'll be in some of those districts and then we'll be around the country. And then we'll come back, we'll draft it, in hopefully a bipartisan manner, introduce it" and try to move it through Congress.

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