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SEN. BOXER ENCOURAGES HOUSE TO IMMEDIATELY APPOINT HIGHWAY BILL NEGOTIATORS

By Keith Laing
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Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) encouraged the House Wednesday afternoon to immediately appoint negotiators for a conference about a new federal highway bill with the Senate.

Boxer, who is chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works, said Wednesday that although the House had again ignored her calls for the lower chamber to accept the Senate's version of the bill to provide road and transit funding, the chamber's approval of a 90-day extension Wednesday should quickly lead to a conference between the two houses of Congress.

"The fact that the House voted to take a step forward on a surface transportation bill is encouraging – as long as they follow through and immediately appoint conferees so that Congress can complete its work and get a bill to the president's desk," Boxer said in a statement released by her office after Wednesday's vote.

"I have spoken to Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, and he has committed to appoint Senate conferees as soon as Senate rules allow," she continued. "The final bill must be truly bipartisan so it can pass both Houses of Congress. The economic recovery really depends on our bipartisan action, because the transportation and construction sectors have such a huge impact on the nation's economy."

Boxer shepherded a bill through the Senate last month that would spend \$109 billion on transportation projects over the next two years.

Republican leaders in the House resisted calls from the White House and Senate Democrats to take up the two-year version of the transportation bill, arguing that they needed to pass extensions to give themselves more time to craft a version of highway bill of their own.

The GOP argued Wednesday they would use the temporary extension, which provides transportation funding, to do exactly as Boxer suggested: quickly get to conference.

"I'm hoping this will be our last extension and hopefully provide an extension to conclude this important work," House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) said on the floor of the House Wednesday during the highway bill debate.

"The purpose of this extension is that we can hopefully bring about resolution and conference legislation to complete our transportation bill."

Democrats in the House said they were eager to get to a transportation conference too, so much so that they were willing to accept language in the extension that was approved Wednesday that authorizes the controversial Keystone XL oil pipeline that was rejected by President Obama earlier this year, despite previously insisting on a "clean" highway bill.

"Taking Republicans at their word that they are serious about moving this process forward — and it appears that they are — passage of this extension of current law through the end of the fiscal year will allow us to go to conference with the other body," said Rep. Nick Rahall (D-W.Va.), the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Sixty-nine Democrats joined Republicans in voting to approve the highway bill extension Wednesday. The measure was approved on a 293-127 vote.

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HOUSE CLEARS HIGHWAY BILL WITH KEYSTONE PIPELINE MANDATE, THWARTS OBAMA

By Ben Geman, Russell Berman and Keith Laing

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Defying a White House veto threat, the House on Wednesday passed legislation that extends transportation program funding through September and mandates construction of a controversial oil pipeline from Canada to the Gulf Coast.

All but 14 Republicans, with support from 69 Democrats, voted 293-127 for legislation that falls far short of Speaker John Boehner's (R-Ohio) earlier plan to move a sweeping five-year, \$260 billion package.

But Boehner's retreat serves two crucial tactical and political purposes for the Speaker. It sets up talks with the Senate on the highway bill and keeps the Keystone pipeline — a centerpiece of GOP attacks on White House energy policy — front and center ahead of the November election.

Republican leaders hailed the bipartisan vote as a rebuke of President Obama. Two senior Democrat leaders, Reps. James Clyburn (S.C.) and John Larson (Conn.), approved the measure.

"The House is on record again in support of the Keystone XL energy pipeline — a project President Obama blocked, personally lobbied against, then tried to take credit for, and now says he'll veto,"

Boehner said in a statement. “There’s no telling where the president stands from one day to the next on Keystone, but he knows the pipeline has broad and bipartisan support in Congress and among the American people.”

The House and Senate transportation committee chairmen said they hoped conferees would be appointed quickly.

“The purpose of this extension is that we can hopefully bring about resolution and conference legislation to complete our transportation bill,” Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.), the chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said Wednesday.

A number of key Democrats also said they were supporting the plan as a way to get to a House-Senate conference.

“It appears that the House has finally found the path out of dysfunction junction,” said Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. “We’ve been there too long.”

The bill creates another clash with the White House over the Keystone pipeline — a project at the heart of the Republicans’ energy agenda and their election-year attacks against the president.

Obama, facing divisions in his political base, has delayed a permitting decision on the project until after the election and threatened to veto the House bill over the pipeline language.

The House vote continues what has been a difficult path forward for transportation program funding, which often has bipartisan support.

Congress last month enacted a 90-day extension of highway programs before it left for a two-week recess, and the Speaker had hoped to use the break as one more chance to win support for the five-year transportation bill he has been pushing for months over objections from his conference.

Yet it was clear as lawmakers returned this week that Boehner had not succeeded.

“If I had my druthers, H.R. 7 would have been on the floor six weeks ago. But there weren’t 218 votes to do this,” Boehner told reporters, speaking of the failed five-year package. “You’ve heard me talk about allowing the House to work its will. It’s not about the House working my will. The House ought to be allowed to work its will. And when it came to this bill, the House decided they didn’t want to vote for it.

“So you have to go to Plan B, and Plan B is on the floor today, and I’m hopeful we’ll be in conference soon.”

The Senate last month passed a two-year, \$109 billion transportation bill with bipartisan support, but House Republican leaders oppose it because it does not contain their favored reforms for highway programs. Boehner wants to link revenues from expanded domestic energy production to infrastructure spending.

The Speaker’s goal now is to win as many reforms as he can during a conference committee negotiation centered on the Senate measure.

The new strategy caught some Republicans by surprise.

Conservatives on Tuesday had complained that they hadn't seen the new highway extension, and aides and lawmakers said the leadership was not formally whipping support for it.

Ten Republicans voted against the 90-day extension the House passed before the recess, but a few of those members said Wednesday they were open to the latest extension because of the addition of the Keystone provision and plans to initiate talks with the Senate.

"This extension I'm trying to support because I've been told this is our vehicle to move things forward, to get a longer-term bill and to get something in terms of an agreement from both chambers," Rep. Robert Dold (R-Ill.) told The Hill.

Rep. John Fleming (R-La.) cited concerns in the construction industry about the uncertainty of short-term extensions, but said he might support the latest House bill because it could lead to a deal with the Senate.

"I think the whole idea here is to force some sort of compromise, where we get something out of it that we wouldn't otherwise," Fleming said.

Still, there was widespread doubt that any long-term highway bill was likely to get done before the November election.

"I don't see how you get a bill before the election, but stranger things have happened," said Rep. Steven LaTourette (R-Ohio), a critic of the GOP leadership's initial transportation proposal. "Maybe lightning will strike and they'll come up with a conference report."

LaTourette said he hoped a compromise would be "the Senate bill dressed up."

Similarly, Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Wednesday that he doesn't see Congress passing a multiyear bill before the November elections, instead predicting more short-term extensions.

"There will not be a bill before the election," LaHood said. "I wish I could say we'll get a transportation bill [in the next six months], but I know we won't." He has chastised Republicans for adding what he called unrelated provisions like the pipeline.

Republicans have hammered the White House for failing to approve Keystone, calling it a missed chance to create jobs and boost energy security.

"There is not a more shovel-ready project than the Keystone XL pipeline, period," House Energy and Commerce Committee Chairman Fred Upton (R-Mich.) said Wednesday.

The project is tricky politics for the White House. Environmentalists bitterly oppose the pipeline due to greenhouse gas emissions from Canadian oil sands and other effects, while a number of major unions back it.

It's uncertain whether Obama will get a chance to use his veto pen on the final package. The Senate in March turned back an amendment to its transportation bill that would have permitted the pipeline, so the new Keystone provision might not survive the conference negotiations.

But a conference could advance other priorities — including a long-term goal of Gulf Coast lawmakers from both parties.

Both the Senate and House package would steer 80 percent of what are expected to be billions of dollars in Clean Water Act penalties from the BP oil spill to the Gulf Coast for restoration.

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TRANSPORTATION SECRETARY SEES NO HOPE FOR PRE-ELECTION HIGHWAY BILL

By Keith Laing
The Hill
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Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Wednesday morning that Congress would not pass a multi-year highway bill before the election in November.

Speaking at a transportation event in Washington, LaHood said there will instead likely be more temporary extensions of current road and transit funding, like the 90-day continuing resolution that was approved by lawmakers last month.

"There will not be a bill before the election," LaHood said Wednesday. "I wish I could say we'll get a transportation bill (in the next six months), but I know we won't."

The House is scheduled to vote as early as Wednesday on a bill that would tie the next extension on federal highway funding to approval of the controversial Keystone pipeline, a cross-country oil pipeline that was rejected earlier this year by President Obama.

Obama and other Democrats have said they want to avert an interruption in transportation funding, but they have vehemently opposed previous efforts to force approval of the oil pipeline despite criticism from Republicans about rising gas prices.

LaHood was critical of the transportation measure that is scheduled to appear before the House on Wednesday.

LaHood called the bill, H.R. 4348, a "big Christmas tree," but he also the measure would "probably pass.

"They've loaded it up with everything they think will assuage their members," LaHood said of Republican leaders in the House, who have resisted holding a vote on a two-year, \$109 billion transportation measure that has been passed by the Senate.

"Look what they've loaded it up with," LaHood continued. "Keystone, coal ash — none of it has anything to do with transportation."

The latter language LaHood was speaking of deals with the Environmental Protection Agency's regulation of the waste produced by coal power plants. LaHood said House leaders should not allow lawmakers from West Virginia and other coal-mining states to add a measure to the highway bill extension that would prevent EPA from setting tough new federal requirements, and instead leave regulation largely in state hands.

LaHood, who was a Republican member of the House before he was appointed by Obama in 2009, said when he was in Congress, lawmakers agreed regularly on five- or six-year transportation bills.

But he admitted it's harder to find consensus on highway bills that lengthy now.

"The reason [the Senate] did a two-year bill is because they could find \$109 billion," he said. "They couldn't \$500 billion or \$600 billion. That's what you need to do a five- or six-year bill."

Despite his sharp criticism throughout the transportation debate of his former GOP colleagues in Congress, which has persisted for much of the year, LaHood said Wednesday that he was still a Republican.

"I just voted in a Republican primary in Illinois," he said.

He added that being a member of the opposite party of the president was helpful to a Transportation secretary.

"The reason I'm in this job is because I'm a Republican," he said. "If I decided to become a Democrat, they'd find another Republican to put in here. Why would I do that?"

LaHood has said previously that he will step down after the November election, even if the president wins reelection.

Asked about his future plans again Wednesday, LaHood demurred.

"I hope [Obama] wins reelection," he said. "I think he's been a good president. I'm going to vote for him and we'll see what happens after that."

The event LaHood delivered his remarks at Wednesday was sponsored by Politico.

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