

FEDERAL NEWS CLIPS

March 22, 2012

HOUSE GOP TO SEEK A 90-DAY HIGHWAY BILL EXTENSION

By Nathan Hurst
Congressional Quarterly
March 21, 2012

House Republicans will bring a three-month extension of highway and transit programs to the floor next week, setting up a potential last-minute fight with the Senate before the current authorization lapses at the end of the month.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John L. Mica, R-Fla., said the short-term extension will allow the GOP conference time to work out differences on a longer-term bill that would link surface transportation authorization to expanded domestic oil and gas production.

“We continue to believe that linking energy and infrastructure is the responsible thing to do in order to meet our long-term needs,” Mica said in a written statement.

The delay would allow Mica’s staff to tinker with the five-year, \$260 billion proposal (HR 7) in an attempt to satisfy concerns raised by different segments of the Republican caucus. Conservative members of the caucus are unhappy with the bill’s funding levels, which exceed the money projected to be available in the Highway Trust Fund.

The Senate last week passed a two-year, \$109 billion highway bill (S 1813) on a bipartisan, 74-22 vote. Senators have called on the House to take up their bill, and Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Tuesday that he was not inclined to consider another extension.

But House leaders are not inclined to take up the Senate bill either.

“We have no plan to take up the Senate bill,” said a senior aide to House Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio. “The Senate bill is flawed. We want to insist, as a priority point, to connect the highway bill with energy production.”

The aide said House Republicans still want to move quickly on a full authorization, perhaps bringing their bill to the floor in April and then proceeding to a conference with the Senate.

“Our discussion process will take place, especially, during the Easter recess,” the aide said.

Since the 2005 highway law (PL 109-59) expired in September 2009, Congress has extended the authorization through a series of eight short-term extensions. States, municipalities and road contractors complain that not enacting a full reauthorization hampers long-term infrastructure planning. The latest extension (PL 112-30) expires March 31.

“Extensions are a death knell,” Senate Environment and Public Works Chairwoman Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., told reporters at a news conference Wednesday at which Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood attended. She said there is concern that another extension would eat into the summer construction season, potentially causing project delays and cost overruns.

Nick J. Rahall II of West Virginia, the ranking Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, is co-sponsoring a House version of the Senate language, and called for House GOP leaders to take up the bill next week ahead of the extension’s expiration.

“It is far past the time to stop the brinkmanship,” Rahall said.

Rahall and Democrat Reps. Timothy H. Bishop of New York and Peter A. DeFazio of Oregon circulated a letter Tuesday urging colleagues to sign on as cosponsors. They asked for commitments to the bill by close of business Wednesday.

GOP LINES UP TO PUNT ON HIGHWAY BILL

By Keith Laing
The Hill
March 21, 2012

House Republicans moved to punt consideration of a long-term highway bill until at least this summer, announcing Wednesday that they would seek to approve a three-month extension of current funding next week.

The short-term bill would give House Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) more time to rally his conference around a five-year, \$260 billion measure that would use revenue from new domestic oil-and-gas drilling to pay for highway projects.

Conservatives have balked at Boehner’s bill, and he has been unable so far to unite his conference behind an alternative.

Most observers saw the chances of Boehner’s bill becoming law as low, given opposition to the new drilling from the White House and some Senate Democrats, but moving the bill through the House would have served as an important political victory for the Speaker. In an election year when the economy and rising gas prices are on voters’ minds, Boehner has sought to seize the advantage by casting his conference as champions of domestic energy while criticizing President Obama’s opposition to new drilling.

This narrative has been complicated by opposition within Boehner's own party to his five-year bill, and by the Senate's passage, in a bipartisan vote, of a two-year, \$109 billion highway bill. The best way for Boehner to get back on offense would be to win support in the House for his own highway bill.

The top Republicans on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee said Wednesday the short-term bill would at least buy Boehner time to build support for the five-year bill.

"That's what we're trying to get the votes for," committee Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) told reporters off the House floor.

Democrats worked hard Wednesday to portray the decision to move a short-term extension instead of the Senate bill as a failure of Boehner's leadership.

"He had his chance to put together a partisan bill," Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said of Boehner in a news conference Wednesday. "He failed and failed again."

But Schumer and other Senate Democrats did not outright reject the idea of passing the short-term extension, which would prevent an interruption in the collection of the federal gas tax set to expire March 31.

The gas tax brings in about \$36 billion per year to the federal government, and Democrats said the money it generates provides funding for millions of construction jobs.

The short-term measure House GOP leaders said they would move would authorize the collection of the gas tax through June 30. This would be the ninth extension of the last multiyear highway bill, which expired in 2009.

The move is the latest in what has become a rollercoaster ride for the House GOP's measure.

After party leaders failed to win backing from their conference for the initial bill, they floated shorter versions of 18 months and two years. When those also met resistance, Boehner tried again to rally support for the long-term bill before threatening to take up the Senate's two-year measure.

Now it appears the Speaker has returned to square one, dispensing with plans to either pass or tweak the measure the Senate sent to the House.

"I've talked to leadership — they've committed, we're committed," Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), chairman of the Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee on Railroads, Pipelines and Hazardous Materials, said in reference to the five-year bill. "We're going to make some tweaks to it to make sure we pick up enough support."

Shuster, a member of the GOP whip team, said he thought party leaders would have better results this time around.

"Last time we whipped this thing, there was a lot of confusion out there," he said.

Shuster said the hope was that the 90-day extension would provide enough time for the House to pass its bill and go to a conference committee to reconcile differences with the Senate. The Senate measure, he said, "is a bill that's got a lot of problems with it."

House Republicans said the two-year Senate bill does not provide enough certainty for transportation contractors, and Boehner desperately wants to include the key element of the House measure that links infrastructure spending and domestic energy production.

Schumer and other Senate Democrats argued again Wednesday that after the two false starts, the House should simply pass the Senate bill. They also warned that the short-term extensions endanger the trust fund for highway projects, which is supported by the gas tax.

"It's death by 1,000 paper cuts," Schumer said. "Every time you extend it, the trust fund gets lower and lower, and it'll be gone by ... the end of the year."

Asked by The Hill if the Senate would reject a short-term House extension if the alternative was an interruption in the gas tax, Schumer said: "We're urging them not to put us in that position, or America."

Originally published here: <http://thehill.com/blogs/transportation-report/highways-bridges-and-roads/217479-house-gop-line-up-to-punt-on-highway-bill>

SENATE DEMOCRATS STOP SHORT OF SAYING THEY'D REJECT SHORT-TERM HIGHWAY

By Keith Laing

The Hill

March 21, 2012

Senate Democrats stopped short Wednesday of saying they would not accept a short-term extension of the highway bill if it is approved next week by the House.

"We're urging them not to put us in that position, or America," Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.) said in response to a question from The Hill about whether the Senate would pick up a short-term bill approved by the House.

Schumer and other Democrats held a press conference Wednesday to urge the House to approve a two-year highway bill passed last week in a bipartisan Senate vote. They warned that if no legislation is approved by March 31, the federal gas tax that funds highway projects would expire and thousands of construction workers would be out of work.

House Republicans are shunning the Senate's bill in favor of working on their own, longer-term highway legislation. But they are expected to move a three-month extension of current funding next week to prevent the gas tax from expiring.

Democrats said the hit the economy would take from expiration of the gas tax would dwarf the economic effect of a partial Federal Aviation Administration shutdown last year.

"It's the FAA shutdown on steroids," Senate Environment and Public Committee Chairwoman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) said. "The FAA bill created and protected about 200,000 jobs. We're talking about 3 million jobs."

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) on Tuesday signaled opposition to picking up the House short-term bill, which House Republicans have said would be a "clean" bill.

But he may not have a choice if the House does not approve the Senate bill.

A short-term bill would be the ninth extension of the transportation bill that expired in 2009.

Schumer warned that the short-term extensions are themselves hurting the highway trust fund that is built around the gas tax.

"It's death by 1,000 paper cuts," said Schumer, the third-ranking Democrat in the Senate. "If you keep extending the bill ... it's the death knell of the bill, because the trust fund will be gone.

"Every time you extend it, the trust fund gets lower and lower, and it'll be gone by ... the end of the year," he said.

The three-month extension announced by the House suggests Republicans are not close to coalescing around their own bill.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) has identified the transportation bill as one of his top election-year priorities, but he has thus far been unable to craft a version of the measure that can win over his conservative House Republican caucus.

Boehner's preferred version of the measure is a five-year, \$260 billion bill as opposed to the Senate's two-year, \$109 billion bill. But that measure came under fire from Republicans because it spent more money than is brought in each year by the federal gas tax, which traditionally funds transportation programs.

Democrats in the House and Senate also balked at Boehner's proposal to use revenue from expanded domestic oil-and-gas drilling to pay for new transportation projects.

Boehner then suggested an 18-month version of the bill that dropped controversial public transportation funding cuts, but he was unable to win support in the House for that measure either.

Schumer said Wednesday that Boehner would not be able to find a way to thread the needle even with more time from a short-term extension.

"He had his chance to put together a partisan bill," Schumer said Wednesday. "He failed and failed again. The game is over."

Originally published here: <http://thehill.com/blogs/transportation-report/highways-bridges-and-roads/217307-senate-dems-raise-specter-of-transportation-shutdown-in-highway-bill-fight>

DON'T DELAY ON HIGHWAY BILL, SCHUMER TELLS HOUSE

Associated Press

March 22, 2012

With federal highway programs set to expire at the end of March, Sen. Charles E. Schumer Wednesday urged against any short-term fixes and said the House should simply pass a two-year measure already approved by the Senate.

But House Republicans on Wednesday held ranks in defeating an attempt to force a vote on the \$109 billion bipartisan transportation bill.

Instead, House leaders said they plan to introduce legislation on Thursday that would continue transportation funding at current levels for another 90 days.

As many as 113,000 transportation-related jobs may be at stake in New York in the next two years, as well as \$3.52 billion in funding for the state's roads, bridges and transit systems, Mr. Schumer, D-N.Y., told New York reporters in a conference call.

ADVERTISEMENT

The Senate's \$209 billion bill passed last week with bipartisan support. The House has struggled to approve a five-year, \$260 billion bill drafted by the House Transportation Committee, hamstrung by conflicts within the Republican majority over policy issues and cost.

House leaders suggested they could pass a three-month extension next week, but Mr. Schumer — the number three Democrat in the Senate leadership — and other top Senate leaders all but ruled out the idea, saying their chamber has already set an example by corraling support on both sides of the aisle.

"I think short-term makes no sense," Mr. Schumer said Wednesday.

Mr. Schumer said a short-term extension will further deplete the federal highway trust fund, which relies on gasoline taxes to fund highway projects, and squander the deal both parties struck in the Senate.

"It's rare on a major issue like this that you get such bipartisanship," Mr. Schumer said.

New York's capital improvement plan includes 136 projects in the north country, worth \$471.6 million, which could receive funding through the legislation, Mr. Schumer's office reported.

In addition to cost, the duration of the bill has been a point of debate. Many lawmakers say they would prefer a five-year measure, including Rep. William L. Owens, D-Plattsburgh, who has said a two-year measure gives state transportation officials little time to prepare projects. But Mr. Schumer said state transportation officials tell him they are "extremely pleased" with the Senate's approach because it averts spending cuts that were in the House version.

Originally published here: <http://www.watertowndailytimes.com/article/20120322/NEWS02/703229816>