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FEDERAL NEWS CLIPS

April 9, 2012

HIGHWAY BILL STUCK IN NEUTRAL

Philadelphia Inquirer Editorial

April 8, 2012

Mapping out national highway projects only three months at a time makes about as much sense as setting off on a cross-country road trip with threadbare tires and a near-empty gas tank.

But that's official U.S. policy at the moment, as a result of familiar congressional gridlock over a new multibillion-dollar federal highway bill that could impact 3 million jobs.

Just as Washington's spending authority was about to expire last week, House Republican leaders won approval for a stopgap 90-day highway bill, forcing it upon the Democratic-controlled Senate, which had come up with a far better \$109 billion two-year spending plan.

Clearly, the House and Senate must get back to work right after Easter on a long-term strategy to provide for the construction and maintenance of thousands of roads and crumbling bridges - many of them across Pennsylvania.

To break this deadlock, it will be up to House Speaker John A. Boehner to work his magic on tea-party colleagues who have been fighting over how to pay for his proposed five-year, \$260 billion transportation bill. Given that the price tag in the House is so much higher, a better strategy would be to park the Boehner bill and hop aboard the Senate proposal.

Besides having a good deal of forward momentum, the Senate plan also takes aim at important highway safety measures.

It would nudge Detroit automakers on safety improvements such as seat belts in buses, heftier fines for delayed safety recalls, needed protections against distracted driving, and reminders for rear-seat passengers to buckle up.

Detroit's opposition to these sensible measures doesn't make sense, although automakers could be right that proposed rules on other technical car specifications represent a bit of congressional overreaching that is worth revisiting.

The Senate bill also provides needed financial incentives for states to take their drunk-driving campaigns to the next level. Money would be doled out to states that wisely enact laws to equip first-time DUI drivers' cars with ignition-interlock devices. Motorists' cars won't start unless they can prove they're sober using the Breathalyzer-type equipment.

Companion funding would advance research into how interlocks could be incorporated into the manufacture of all vehicles. Contrary to claims by the hospitality industry, there's no evidence that this would be the thin edge of the wedge to ban social drinking. In fact, transportation officials say there are no plans to require every vehicle to have the devices.

With the highway bill critical to addressing such a broad range of important transportation needs, there's no more time for Congress to idle on the side of the road.

Originally published here: http://articles.philly.com/2012-04-08/news/31308560_1_highway-bill-transportation-bill-senate-plan