

DAILY NEWS CLIPS

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REP. BLACK FACES TOUGH CROWD OVER ROLL-YOUR-OWN TOBACCO

By Daniel Potter

WPLN News (Nashville, TN Public Radio)

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Tennessee Congressman Diane Black got an earful from constituents Tuesday night about roll-your-own tobacco shops. About two-dozen people turned out for Black's town-hall meeting in Lebanon.

Roll-your-own tobacco shops sidestep a higher tax on cigarettes by instead selling tobacco, and letting customers use a machine in the store to make cigarettes themselves. Last month Black introduced a bill to reclassify that as manufacturing (HR4134). Several shop owners like Ned Overton insisted that would kill jobs.

"You want to support small business and you want to support jobs. You're going to put this girl out of a job, that girl out of a job, there are other people – you'll put me out of work! You'll put that man right there with his hand on his chin out of work. You'll put that man in the blue shirt out of work."

Black argues such businesses are unfair to competitors that pay the higher tax on cigarettes. One woman at the meeting also challenged Black for supporting a conservative budget proposal, while another called on her to protect defense spending from cuts. Asked about the tough crowd afterward, Black said "this is what town-halls are all about."

A similar bill (HB3606/SB3316) to make roll-your-own shops pay specific taxes is moving in Tennessee's legislature. On Tuesday a Senate committee put off dealing with it for a second week in a row. On the House side it's scheduled to go before the Finance committee Wednesday.

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VIEWPOINT: FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION BILL SHOULDN'T BE A POLITICAL FOOTBALL

Op-Ed by T. Peter Ruane

The Muskegon Chronicle (MI)

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Transportation funding is a key to U.S. economic success, according to our Viewpoint author.

The transportation bill that's tangled up these days in Congress is being treated by some as a political football, but the average American's commute to work should not be tossed around frivolously by politicians. Playing politics with crucial infrastructure might be business as usual in today's Washington, but it's bad for business on Main Street.

Here in Muskegon, we can't afford to wait any longer for Washington to take action on legislation that will build and improve key roads, bridges and transit systems. According to American Road & Transportation Builders Association data, firms in Muskegon and the surrounding counties that are involved in transportation design and construction work directly employ about 4,625 people, which in turn, help further support an additional 4,659 jobs in retail, fast food and other services industries. Collectively, these jobs contribute over \$416 million to the regional economy each year. These are good jobs at good wages.

Yet, the federal legislation authorizing these construction programs -- and all the public-private partnerships that go with it -- is now 30 months overdue. These local jobs and hundreds of thousands more across America could be at risk if Congress doesn't act soon. At a time when the construction industry -- already hard hit by the economic downturn of the last few years -- is reeling from a 17 percent unemployment rate that is more than double the national average, there's no time to lose. Moreover, if the transportation bill is stalled for much longer, the economic activity that depends on a robust transportation network -- which is to say, just about everything -- would be put into jeopardy.

The U.S. Senate, in fact, has already acted. In a remarkable moment of constructive bipartisanship, on March 14, the Senate voted 74-22 to approve a two-year highway, transit and safety bill. When's the last time anything has passed in Congress with that many votes? Interestingly, the Senate bill was spearheaded by two leaders who are normally polar opposites on most issues. A strong progressive from California, Barbara Boxer, and an equally conservative Oklahoman, Jim Inhofe, came together on a bill that maintains current investment levels, contains critical reforms to speed the completion of projects, improves accountability, and provide greater flexibility to states in addressing their unique infrastructure needs.

So, the Senate transportation bill is a good example of the "vital center" of American politics -- the place where reasonable people of good will can come together for the common good. This bill underscores the bipartisan idea that growing the nation's infrastructure grows the economy and jobs. No wonder, then, the bill had the support of both the business community and organized labor.

Unfortunately, the House has not acted and its version of the bill has not moved forward. Rep. Bill Huizenga, R-Zeeland, who has the ability to play an enormously constructive role, needs to support this bill. Some members of the House, along with Washington, D.C., based ideologues, seem to think that a campaign to shrink government should include shrinking essential transportation. Perhaps they don't

realize that shrinking transportation also shrinks the jobs and economic growth that rely on an efficient transportation network.

What's needed is a broader, more responsible vision that allows for progress, even amidst partisan divisions.

The first Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, had that broader vision. Even in the midst of the Civil War, in 1862, Lincoln pushed for construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, connecting the Midwest to California. Some might have called this effort a "railroad to nowhere," since there was so little development in the West at that time. Yet as the railroad was completed in 1869, East and West became knitted together, and commerce and prosperity radiated out from that continent-connecting rail link. As is always the case, economic growth followed infrastructure growth.

Indeed, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the major parties shared an overall consensus that infrastructure—from canals to railroads to highways to mass transit—was vital for growth and development. And so, for example, the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 was championed by both Republican President Eisenhower and the Democratic leaders who, back then, controlled both chambers of Congress.

We need that same problem-solving spirit now. It's time for Congress to do its job. When it returns from its current recess, the House, including Rep. Huizenga, should pass its bill, and join the Senate in helping rebuild the infrastructure foundation that is key to supporting jobs and getting the U.S. economy rolling again.

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