



## Congress approves \$286 billion highway bill

Measure smaller than before, but taxpayer group still sees pork

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WASHINGTON - Congress on Friday passed sweeping highway and mass transit legislation that will send nearly \$300 billion to the states to build and fix roads, create thousands of new jobs and — lawmakers hope — save lives and cut hours wasted in traffic jams.

The bill "will affect every American in some way," said Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt. "The impact of this bill will be felt for decades to come."

The 91-4 vote in the Senate came hours after the House approved the measure, 412-8.

House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., speaking shortly before the House passed the six-year, \$286.4 billion transportation bill, said that after passage maybe fathers would have to answer the question "Daddy, when are we going to get there?" three or four fewer times in their lives.

Afterward, lawmakers streamed out of the Capitol, heading home for their summer break carrying promises of new highway and bridge projects, rail and bus facilities, and bike paths and recreational trails they had secured for their states and districts.

President Bush, in a statement, promised to sign the bill that "will strengthen and modernize the transportation networks vital to America's continued economic growth."

### Opponents charge pork-barrel politics

Under the legislation, each state would receive a share of federal highway funding depending on their contributions — through the federal gas tax — to the Highway Trust Fund. The bill, running more than 1,000 pages, also specifies thousands of projects requested by individual members.

The projects range from two bridges in Alaska, one named for House Transportation Committee Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, funded at more than \$450 million, to \$72,000 for a bus in Cornwall, N.Y.

Taxpayers for Common Sense, which lists 6,361 of these projects valued at \$23 billion, and other watchdog groups say such projects are wasteful, handed out as political rewards.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., cited dozens of what he suggested were questionable projects in a highway bill, including \$3 million to fund production of a documentary about infrastructure advancements in Alaska.

The bill, he said, is "terrifying in its fiscal consequences and disappointing for the lack of fiscal discipline." Joining McCain in voting against the bill were Sens. John Cornyn, R-Texas, Judd Gregg, R-N.H., and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz.

### Supporters say projects are merit-based

But other lawmakers say the projects are determined on merit and see them as essential to their states and communities.

They say money for infrastructure is well spent when congestion costs American drivers 3.6 billion hours of delay and 5.7 billion gallons of wasted fuel every year. Substandard road conditions and roadside hazards are a factor in nearly one-third of the 42,000 traffic fatalities annually, officials say, and every \$1 billion in highway construction creates 47,500 jobs.

"I don't think there is anything this Congress could do more definitively to put people back to work, to stimulate our economy to increase our efficiency, our competitiveness, both nationally and internationally," said Rep. Peter DeFazio of Oregon, a top Democrat on the Transportation Committee.

The bill allots more than \$50 billion for transit programs and \$6 billion for transportation safety.

Joan Claybrook, president of Public Citizen, said she was pleased that the legislation would require the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to create stability standards by 2009 to prevent vehicle rollovers.

It contains a \$15 billion highway bond plan, pushed by Sens. Jim Talent, R-Mo., and Ron Wyden, D-Ore., and Rep. Sam Johnson, R-Texas, that will promote road and bridge construction through public-private partnerships.

### **Safe routes for kids**

Rep. James Oberstar, D-Minn., ranking Democrat on the Transportation Committee, pushed for a five-year, \$612 million Safe Routes to School program to encourage kids to walk and ride bikes to school.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving praised the inclusion of \$29 million a year to implement high-visibility law enforcement efforts to deter drunken driving and grant funds to states that pass a primary seat belt law — allowing police to stop vehicles for seat belt violations — or achieve a belt usage rate of 85 percent.

The bill expands toll pilot projects for new roads as a way to ease congestion, and it gives states authority to set rules for access to car pool lanes by single-occupancy hybrid vehicles.

The legislation covers 2004-2009 and comes nearly two years after the 1998-2003 act expired. Congress on Friday had to approve the 12th temporary extension of the old act to keep money flowing to the states while it tried to come up with a new, more generous bill.

### **Sticking points**

A main cause for the delay was a rift between Congress, demanding a maximum amount of spending on the infrastructure, and the White House, which threatened to veto any bill that added to the federal deficit.

There was also the problem of satisfying the complaints of "donor" states that pay more into the Highway Trust Fund than they get back in federal grants. The final bill guarantees that by 2008 every state will get at least a 92 percent rate of return, up from the current minimum of 90.5 percent.

The House had planned to vote on the legislation Thursday, but debate was halted when several lawmakers objected strongly to Senate-inserted language in the compromise that would have reopened a runway on an air base in Montana.

House members contended that was an attempt to reverse the process under which military base facilities are closed. Sen. Max Baucus, D-Mont., who promoted the proposal, insisted that the base-closing process was not applicable to the runway at Malmstrom Air Force Base, but he agreed to

withdraw the proposal so the bill could move forward.

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