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Transit businesses see concerns with House bill

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A lack of dedicated federal funding for transit agencies could begin to impact consumers if lawmakers can't approve a new bill, according to the Denton County Transportation Authority (DCTA).

Transit agencies across North Texas are anxiously awaiting a new bill from congress that will outline long-term funding. House Republicans are reworking Speaker John Boehner's transit package, known as HR 7 that was released in February.

"This will affect bus or rail or any transit provider -- we're all going to be impacted by this bill," said Dee Leggett, spokeswoman for DCTA. "DCTA has appealed to our local representatives and expressed our support of an amendment that would reestablish a provision to what the law used to be. We have received every indication that the House is making an effort to revisit the bill."

One of the major concerns to come out of HR 7 was the end of dedicated federal funding for public transportation, which transit agencies have counted on for three decades.

"Right now, because we don't have a bill, we're working under the status quo. Consumers won't see a change right now in service, it will depend on what the final bill is before we will know the impact," Leggett said. "Transit agencies are worried that the House is undoing what was done in the past. We're worried that the funding from HR 7 won't meet the needs of transit. They're not identifying long term needs, and the industry has a lot of concern because it's changing how transportation is being funded."

Leggett said there are good and bad aspects of the bill, but the concerns over the changes out weigh the good the bill is trying to accomplish. The House has proposed ending all dedicated federal funding for public transportation. It proposes to take away the portion of the gas tax dedicated for transportation and replace it with a lump sum from the general fund that would be given only once.

"The fact that transit would no longer get funding from the gas tax and instead get \$40 billion to fund transit over next five years has caused so much concern. The House hasn't even said where that money would come from," Leggett said. "Our concern is that it won't meet the high demand in the future."

From the \$.20 of gas tax dedicated for transportation and education, Leggett said DCTA receives about \$.02, which translates into about \$3.5 million in funding each year. With HR 7 removing the gas tax funding, Leggett said DCTA doesn't know what amount of

federal funding it will receive.

"For transportation agencies, we must have a long-term funding bill, and it must include a dedicated funding source. This will cripple our ability to do long term planning because we don't know what our funding will be. It could possibly change everything as far as long-term planning goes," Leggett said. Our cash flow model must change because we don't know how we will be getting funding if lawmakers don't change HR 7."

Right now, DCTA plans ahead as far as 25 years out. Leggett said the DCTA board recently passed an update to its long-term plan.

Leggett said DCTA's annual operating expenses are around \$18 million, it also receives about \$10-12 million through grant programs. Leggett said there is a common misunderstanding about gas tax. It's a flat tax and never inflates based on the price of gasoline.

"Revenues don't increase just because the price of gas has gone up. It's a dedicated funding source that hasn't been adjusted since the early 1990s, but costs are going up," Leggett said. "It's a struggle to keep up with the growing communities without an increase in funding."

HR 7 also cuts funding for transportation in almost every state across the county. It also puts funding dependent on drilling royalties, federal pension cuts and other revenue sources, which have yet to be determined.

Another area of concern is that HR 7 places a lot of control in the hands of the states rather than the local and regional agencies. It also puts an end to the "safe routes to school" program and the "transportation enhancements" program.

The safe routes program aims to help communities to make walking and bicycling to school a safe and routine activity once again. It also makes funding available for projects including building safer street crossings and establishing programs that encourage children and their parents to walk and bicycle safely to school. The enhancements program funds projects in communities that will revitalize its transportation.

HR 7 also bars transit authorities that offer bus and rail services from using a program used to buy buses or build bus facilities.

"We can't know the final impact at DART, but we are continuing to monitor the entire authorization process in Washington," said Mark Ball, spokesman for DART.

Leggett said transit agencies want to send a unified message to Congress, so they are coordinating through the American Public Transportation Association

"We want to make sure that a long-term funding bill is passed that will protect the interests of DCTA, the community and the consumers," Leggett said. "Residents need to communicate the importance of transit with their representatives."

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