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U.S. Senate transportation bill passes; now headed to House

Hutchison says rate-of-return increase represents billions of dollars nationwide



A Senate-passed transportation bill that would continue funding for projects nationwide is headed to the House.

A sweeping federal transportation bill is halfway home. The U.S. Senate this week passed a two-year, \$109 billion bill that lays out a road map for highway, transit and safety programs nationwide. The bill now is headed to the U.S. House, currently in recess, where members must decide to either try again to pass their own five-year, \$260 billion transportation package of bills or take up the Senate bill.

The provisions of the Senate bill would have significant impact on Texas, said U.S. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas. And supporters are hopeful it will pass the House before the March 31 deadline for reauthorizing surface transportation programs, which are set to expire on that date.

Hutchison said the Senate bill would raise states' rate-of-return for Highway Trust Fund dollars from the current 92 percent to 95 percent, which she says represents billions of dollars. She noted that in 1993, the rate of return was 76 percent, "So we've come a long way in the right direction."

Texas' senior senator also said the bill includes \$1 billion for the TIFIA (Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act) program. Texas is the nation's number-one beneficiary of that program, said Hutchison, "and will be well positioned under the new program."

Most importantly to state and local government entities, the Senate bill at least maintains the current levels (inflation adjusted) of funding for infrastructure throughout the country. Owners of many of those projects fear they will be stalled or halted completely if the March 31 deadline is not met and will be closely watching action in the House.

Some of the other highlights of the Senate-passed bill include:

- Consolidation of more than 100 surface transportation projects into fewer than 30 programs;
- Transfers significant decision-making authority from the federal level back to state and local governments;
- Streamlines the environmental review process;

- Increases the cap on TIFIA from \$122 million to \$1 billion per year, and increases the eligible project costs to 49 percent from the current rate of 33 percent; gives more flexibility for projects in rural areas and includes freight and passenger rail, international land ports of entry and intelligent transportation systems;
- Streamlines the environmental review process to reduce the time it takes to build roads and bridges;
- Provides for competitive grants for national and regional university transportation center research;
- Preserves bicycle, pedestrian, safe routes to schools and rails-to-trails programs;
- Sets deadlines for the long-distance and tour bus industries to have seat belts, stronger roofs, anti-ejection windows and rollover crash avoidance systems on their buses; and
- Gives the Federal Transit Administration the authority to set and enforce safety standards for local transit agencies.

The House has been unsuccessful at garnering support for its transportation bill, mainly because it would allow drilling in part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and would mean approval for the Keystone XL pipeline, both highly controversial issues.

If a final bill is not on the president's desk by the March 31 deadline, Congress would be forced to put a temporary extension in place to avoid shutting down transportation projects nationwide, the furloughing of Federal Highway Administration employees and the probable loss of jobs for many construction workers across the country.