



Bills cloud DCTA's future

By Bj Lewis / Staff Writer

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Transportation officials, including the Denton County Transportation Authority, continue to wait on a long-term bill to stave off possible funding woes for the industry.

In recent weeks, members of the transportation industry have lobbied against congressional bills that would have eliminated all dedicated federal funding for public transportation. The Senate passed a bill Wednesday with amended language that helps the situation, but the process is waiting on members of the House of Representatives to come together and do the same, DCTA officials say, with a deadline looming.

"The current extension expires at the end of this month," said Dee Leggett, vice president of communications and planning for DCTA.

She recalled the fallout from the expiration of the Federal Aviation Administration's funding extension last summer.

"All the construction projects had to get shut down; people had to get laid off. ... In this economy, what you don't want to see is construction delayed and people out of work. What we need is a short-term extension and a long-term bill. The Senate bill was a good step in that direction."

The Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act, the Senate's two-year, \$109 billion surface transportation authorization passed by a vote of 74-22.

In a recent news release about the bill, and in letters to Congress members, American Public Transportation Association officials said they were "eager to see both chambers move forward on surface transportation authorization bills. The strong bipartisan vote in favor of passage of the Senate bill provides continued momentum behind efforts to see a bill enacted this year."

Leggett also commended the strong bipartisan effort, but said there were still some things the agency would like to see tweaked in the Senate bill and hopes they can be addressed in committee.

Among those tweaks are some licensing provisions in the bill for commuter rail operators.

Leggett said DCTA officials have not been able to determine how the agency would be impacted, but it could call for some additional insurance requirements that could be quite costly for an agency its size.

"It sets some liability thresholds for commuter rail operators. For a 21-mile corridor, that would be pretty expensive," she said.

Currently, DCTA partners with the other regional rail providers on insurance to minimize the cost. The worry is the Senate bill's rules will require each of the transportation entities to operate independently.

"If we each have to individually bear the costs, it will eat into DCTA's ability to expand operations," Leggett said. "That's probably the main concern we have about the Senate bill."

The bill has some good things, Leggett added, including giving agencies like DCTA additional flexibility on how they can use their funds — like paying for both operations and capital as opposed to just operations, as they do now.

The bill would provide more streamlined steps toward construction projects and efforts to reduce the time it takes to go from the planning stages to construction.

The bill would also increase funding levels for transit authorities, allowing local agencies and the region to better plan for how much money they get, instead of competing for grants.

"The administration and Senate, when developing a bill, did a good job of listening to the industry," Leggett said.

The House has not announced when it will take up its bill, but Leggett said the hope is to at least have an extension soon.

“Or it will be somewhat problematic for highways and transit to build and operate systems if they are relying on the federal government,” she said.

BJ LEWIS can be reached at 940-566-6875. His e-mail address is blewis@dentonrc.com.