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EDITORIAL

Cars, Trains and Partisan Posturing

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The transportation bill is vital, providing billions of dollars to states and communities to build and repair roads, ensure bridges are safe and improve mass transit for millions of commuters. It also sustains some 2.9 million jobs, many in the hard-pressed construction industry.

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The Senate gets the importance of this legislation — and the danger of playing partisan games with it. The House does not.

The bipartisan Senate bill calls for investing \$109 billion on critical projects over two years. This would keep spending at present levels by supplementing gas-tax revenues — the main source of financing for transportation programs — with money from other parts of the federal budget. In recent years, gas taxes have dwindled even as construction costs rose.

The House bill, by stark contrast, would extend current financing for three months, but makes no provision for sustaining programs over the long haul. The problems don't end there.

The House bill includes yet another effort to bludgeon the White House into approving the environmentally risky Keystone XL oil pipeline. President Obama rightly shelved the project, pending a new route proposal from the Canadian builder. But House Republicans, ever eager to do industry's bidding, aren't giving up. There are other extraneous riders — among them a provision that would prevent the Environmental Protection Agency from imposing new rules requiring the safe disposal of coal ash, a toxic byproduct from power plants that often winds up in porous landfills and threatens local water supplies.

House Republicans predictably advertise their bill as a jobs bill, making exaggerated claims about the jobs the pipeline would create and the jobs environmental rules would destroy. But the real threat to jobs is the House's habit of relying on short-term extensions, which makes it hard to reform the underlying law or do serious planning.

At some point Congress is going to have to face the fact that gas-tax revenues are falling well short of the nation's transportation needs, and that new money must be found. The Senate acknowledges this; the House does not.

Congressional negotiators must soon confront the two versions. It seems hard to believe

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that the Senate could agree to the House bill or any of its provisions. Yet conference committees have a way of providing nasty surprises, and the Senate conferees must insist on long-term financing while rejecting the riders.

Harry Reid, the Senate majority leader, says he will stand firm against Keystone. He may have to push his colleagues hard. In March, a Senate bill requiring the president to green light the pipeline received 56 votes, including 11 Democrats, but fell short of the 60 needed to pass. The 14 Senate delegates to the conference committee split down the middle on that vote, and just one switch to the pro-pipeline position would give the House its victory.

There is one good provision in the House as well as the Senate bill that deserves to survive the inevitable wrangling. It would dedicate 80 percent of the penalties that BP will pay for the gulf oil spill to environmental restoration in the Gulf of Mexico. The Senate version would also authorize \$700 million a year for two years for the [Land and Water Conservation Fund](#), the main federal program for the acquisition of threatened open space that Congress has shortchanged for years.

Otherwise the bills are wildly different — one shows respect and care for a balanced transportation policy, the other plays cynical games.

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