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Highway talks veer toward stalemate

By Keith Laing - 06/10/12 06:00 PM ET

House Speaker John Boehner's (R-Ohio) suggestion of a possible six-month highway bill extension last week is causing transportation observers to worry that a multiyear bill is now out-of-reach.

A 47-member conference committee has been trying for a month to find a compromise between the House and Senate on a bill that would provide transportation funding for at least the next 18 months.

But one transportation industry source said on Friday that Boehner raising the possibility of what would be a tenth temporary extension of current highway funding, as well as the recent barbs thrown between Senate Majority Harry Reid (D-Nev.) and House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), showed the talks are now on "life support."

"I think House GOP, led by Cantor, is trying to run out the clock to the fall election and deny Obama a win," the source told The Hill.

Reid accused Cantor last week of trying to sabotage the U.S. economy by blocking an agreement on the transportation bill, a suggestion that was called "bull----" by a spokesman for Boehner.

House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (Calif.) echoed the sentiment from Reid, saying the GOP only wanted to approve extensions even though they are "using up the trust fund, the highway trust fund, they are hurting job creation — in fact people will lose jobs — and it's just the wrong thing to do."

The sharp rhetoric from the highest-ranking leaders in both political parties is causing supporters of the multiyear highway bill to become more pointed in their comments about the ongoing congressional negotiations.

"We're doing more than urging them; we're calling them out," Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa (D) said on a conference call organized by the U.S. Conference of Mayors on Friday.

Villaraigosa, who is president of the USCM, said Congress passing a six-month extension like Boehner suggested would mean lawmakers are not "doing their job."

"We've never had so many extensions of the surface transportation program," he said. "They've extended the surface transportation bill 10 times. Congress needs to do their job. Job number one is job creation."

Connecticut Gov. Dannel P. Malloy (D) agreed, arguing that a multiyear transportation bill would act as a "tailwind for our economy."

"We need to put people back to work," Malloy said. "(States) are required to plan ahead. We need a federal surface transportation bill with a time horizon of more than one or three or six months."

Malloy said that Boehner's suggestion of a short-term extension was an attempt to hold "a sword of Damocles over everyone's head."

"He hasn't produced anything on transportation," Malloy said.

Boehner said last week that despite his suggestion of a possible extension, his preference was for the conference committee to reach an agreement on the multiyear highway bill.

"I have a lot of confidence in the members on the conference," Boehner said during the same press conference in which he raised the possibility of a six-month extension.

"And frankly, I believe in a bipartisan way, the conference on the highway bill wants to come to a resolution," Boehner continued.

The chairwoman of the conference committee, Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), has tried to sound optimistic notes about the conference committee's negotiations, even as pessimism surrounding the congressional talks has grown.

Boxer said this week that she and Republican Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.) delivered a draft of a possible compromise to House Republicans. She sharply criticized Boehner for talking about an extension before the clock runs out on.

"I am very disappointed that Speaker Boehner is even talking about a long-term transportation extension, which would lead to the Highway Trust Fund going bankrupt, when all of our efforts must be focused on passing a transportation bill by the June 30th deadline," Boxer said in a statement after Boehner made his comments.

"Three million jobs and thousands of businesses are at stake," she continued.

Supporters of a multiyear bill found reason to cheer Friday when the House voted to defeat a motion to instruct conferees to limit spending levels on the proposed transportation bill.

"An overwhelming House majority...rejected a motion that would have done serious damage to our nation's transportation system and delivered a deathblow to our economy," AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department President Ed Wytkind said in a statement.

The motion, from Rep. Paul Broun (R-Ga.), called for limiting spending on the highway bill to the amount of money that is collected through the 18.4 cents-per-gallon gas tax.

Both the House and the Senate's original proposals for a new transportation bill called for spending about \$13 billion more than the approximately \$35 billion that is brought in per year by the gas tax.

The motion to impose the limit on the ongoing conference negotiations was defeated on an 82-323 vote.

Despite that glimmer of hope for supporters of a multiyear transportation bill, however, Republicans on the conference committee had not responded by week's end to the Senate's proposed draft of a compromise.

They also had not issued any public statements similar to Boxer's expressing optimism about the talks. When asked for an update, a spokesman for House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) said only that "conferees are reviewing the Senate proposal and will determine the next steps."

Source:

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