



## THE HILL'S Congress Blog

Where lawmakers come to blog

### **Congress has unfinished business on the transportation front**

By Former Sen. Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) and former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer (D) - 07/19/12 03:04 PM ET

After almost three years of delay, Congress recently passed a new surface transportation authorization bill, called Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century or MAP-21. There is much to like in the new bill, both in its substantive provisions and in the process by which it was finally enacted. MAP-21 incorporates important first steps toward the implementation of key recommendations of the Bipartisan Policy Center (BPC) on performance management, program consolidation, and expansion of TIFIA credit support.

Significantly, members of Congress demonstrated a capacity to compromise – a capacity in short supply lately – around a national program that has, for over fifty years, generated support across partisan, economic, and regional boundaries. Investment in transportation facilities and systems has been viewed historically as an appropriate exercise of federal interest, an interest that this Congress has now accepted and recognized.

Congress has shown that transportation policy can serve as a model for bipartisan action in other important areas.

Congressional leadership from both parties placed the greatest emphasis on funding and the continuation of federal highway, transit, and highway safety programs through September 30, 2014, and on the construction and related jobs that will be generated and stimulated by the enactment of this bill. The greater certainty in timing and funding for state, regional, and local transportation agencies will allow them to make plans and to carry out infrastructure investments that should contribute to economic recovery and address high unemployment in the construction sector.

We have consistently emphasized that investments in transportation infrastructure are critically important to the nation's productivity and economic recovery and to the creation of long-term jobs. Any grand bargain on the federal budget deficit and the national debt should incorporate investing in infrastructure.

Still, we should recognize that public capital is limited and that investment resources are constrained, and there must be a premium on better transportation planning, capital programming, and targeting investments toward programs and projects that offer the greatest returns and benefits in terms of economic growth and the achievement of other key national goals. In this regard, there is reason to be concerned about areas where the new surface transportation act may have failed to make sufficient progress.

We applaud certain provisions of MAP-21, including the consolidation and simplification of major highway programs, the use of federal funds more effectively to leverage other public and private sources of investment capital through a significant expansion of the TIFIA credit program, the statement of national goals for transportation policy, and the development of performance measures to evaluate investment decisions.

However, in significant ways the reforms in MAP-21 fall short. A great deal depends upon on whether the Congress and the Administration that take office in 2013 build upon these foundational steps. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on the preservation and restoration of existing transportation assets. Moreover, while substantially increased funding will be available through the TIFIA program to leverage additional public and private investment in transportation, MAP-21 fails to allow states sufficiently broad or adequate discretion to establish new revenue streams through tolling or the imposition of user charges on existing, as well as on new, facilities. These user-based revenue streams could provide states with some of the greatest potential sources of new capital for investment in transportation infrastructure, and they should not be denied the capacity to tap them.

Moreover, while the articulation in MAP-21 of national goals and performance measures are important first steps, there is little in this new legislation that will provide assurance that these goals and measures will make a real difference in how money is to be invested. Without further steps, there is little likelihood that these provisions will provide taxpayers with accountability or the confidence that transportation funds are being invested in the most productive and beneficial ways.

Finally, we believe that two other key issues have not been adequately addressed by MAP-21.

First, in the absence of strong and significant freight and metropolitan transportation discretionary grant programs, we will not be able to address adequately the issues of interstate commerce, national connectivity, metropolitan mobility, and labor market access. Improvements in these areas are critical to economic growth and enduring prosperity. These discretionary grant programs should, as recommended by BPC, be based on Congressionally-authorized criteria and measured by performance outcomes.

Second, the new surface transportation authorization act continues the practice that developed over the last few years of SAFETEA-LU of dependence on transfers of general funds to the Highway Trust Fund in order to meet authorized program levels. Nothing is provided, and no new steps are proposed, toward basing these programs on renewed, reformed, and sustainable forms of user-based funding. This is a critical omission at a time of serious national fiscal and economic challenges.

Nevertheless, while there are areas to improve and on which to build, Congress has accomplished a great deal in the passage of MAP-21. Its enactment can be the beginning of a new era of national transportation policy and of wiser investment in the most important and beneficial transportation assets.

*Former United States Senator Slade Gorton (R-Wash.) and former Detroit Mayor Dennis Archer previously served as co-chairs of the Bipartisan Policy Center's National Transportation Policy Project.*

Source:

<http://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/economy-a-budget/239037-congress-has-unfinished-business-on-the-transportation-front>

The contents of this site are © 2012 Capitol Hill Publishing Corp., a subsidiary of News Communications, Inc.