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House GOP unveils bill slashing highway grants

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WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans controlling the House unveiled legislation on Tuesday that proposes a huge cut to a transportation grant program championed by President Barack Obama that funds road and bridge projects, light rail networks, port construction and bike paths.

The so-called TIGER grant program dates to Obama's 2009 economic stimulus bill and was funded at \$600 million this year. Obama wants to nearly double the program's budget, but the newly released spending bill covering federal transportation and housing programs offers the administration just \$100 million, an 83 percent cut from current levels.

The \$52 billion measure maintains funding for community development block grants popular with local governments and fully funds an upgrade to the Federal Aviation Administration's NextGen air traffic control system. But it proposes cuts to Amtrak capital construction and slices \$1.2 billion from Obama's request for housing subsidies for the poor.

The transportation and housing measure is the fourth of 12 spending bills revealed by House Republicans for the 2015 budget year that begins Oct. 1. Lawmakers are trying to get the annual appropriations process back on track after it ran aground last year before a December budget deal eased automatic cuts known as sequestration.

The legislation is free of earmarked spending, consistent with the GOP ban on such pet projects.

It's hardly free of parochialism however. For instance, it contains language by Rep. John Culberson, R-Texas, blocking construction of a light rail line on Houston's Richmond Avenue; lifts weight limits for trucks traveling on interstate highways in Idaho, Wisconsin and Mississippi; and continues a \$150 million subsidy for the Metro rail system in Washington, District of Columbia and its suburbs. California Republicans won tighter restrictions designed to block a high-speed rail project in the state, a project they believe would be a boondoggle.

It maintains a \$149 million appropriation for a program that subsidizes air fares to rural airports. Amtrak capital grants would be cut by \$200 million and employees of the passenger railroad would generally be limited to \$35,000 a year in overtime.

The measure is part of the approximately \$1 trillion portion of the federal budget that passes through Congress each year.

The 2015 round of spending bills are essentially capped at current levels. But there's actually less than that because of a \$4 billion difference of opinion between the Congressional Budget Office and the White House's Office of Management and Budget over how much revenue the government will reap next year from Federal Housing Administration mortgage insurance premiums.

This arcane dispute means that the transportation and housing measure faces a \$1.8 billion cut in real terms, even though it appropriates \$1.2 billion above current levels. That's a major reason driving the cuts to TIGER grants, which are likely to be reversed in end-game negotiations with the Senate and White House.

A program that helps local governments build or rehabilitate housing units for the poor — often in partnership with nonprofit groups — would face a \$300 million cut from its current budget of \$1 billion.

A House Appropriations subcommittee is slated to approve the measure on Wednesday, and it faces a floor debate later this month.

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