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Washington headed to another budget war over road, transit funding

April 09, 2014

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If you thought the days of nasty, nail-biting financial crisis in Washington were over, or at least on temporary hiatus, guess again. A beaot of a financial meltdown may be coming this summer, and U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski is warning that it could impact billions of dollars in critical road, bridge and public transit projects here.

The problem is with the federal bill that allots tens of billions of dollars for surface transportation projects. Not only is the multi-year funding bill due to expire Sept. 1, but the source of money for the trust fund that pays for the projects — gasoline taxes — is running short and, by some counts, **will run out by July or so**. In prior years, Congress patched over the problem, temporarily extending spending authority and shoring up the trust fund with a diversion of money from the general treasury. But for a variety of political and financial reasons, that's going to be tough this year.

Ergo, concerns are rising that the pipeline will be turned off right in the middle of a construction season.

"I am trying to wake up my colleagues to this coming crisis," said Mr. Lipinski, who has a catbird seat on the flap as the ranking Democratic member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. "Illinois already is cutting back based on this expectation that federal reimbursement dollars will be limited."

Guy Tridgell, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Transportation, said that's not true, at least not yet. Even if the federal tap was shut off July 30, "We believe we have enough balance to carry us through for three or four months."

'WATCHING VERY CLOSELY'

But the matter definitely is on IDOT's radar, he adds, with the department beginning to ask Illinois members of Congress for help. "This is something we're watching very closely."

So, why don't the folks in Washington work it out, just like **they reached an armistice last winter in** the wider budget wars?

Part of the reason is that the chairman of the transportation and infrastructure panel, Bill Shuster of Pennsylvania, has a tea party conservative standing between him and renomination, making it difficult for him to champion any new federal spending. He's expected to win, but with the primary not until May, that won't leave a lot of time to resolve something by Sept. 1.

Then there's a wider continuing battle over how to shore up gasoline taxes, which haven't been raised in a long time and no longer provide enough revenue to maintain existing infrastructure. Raising any tax in Washington is nigh impossible these days, and Congress had to squabble to pass even the current transportation bill. **Remember the big flap a couple of years ago** when national Republicans moved to pay for roads by axing money for transit? That drew an extremely hostile reaction even from GOP members of Illinois' congressional delegation.

I'm not necessarily predicting a repeat. Neither is Mr. Lipinski. But I'm not ruling one out either. The Chicago Transit Authority, Metra and Pace all depend on the multi-year federal transit bill to pay for new equipment and track work. IDOT depends on it for roads, as does the city of Chicago. So, commuters, get ready for a little summer drama.

Editor's note: The spelling of Bill Shuster's name has been corrected.

Follow Greg on Twitter at [@GregHinz](#).

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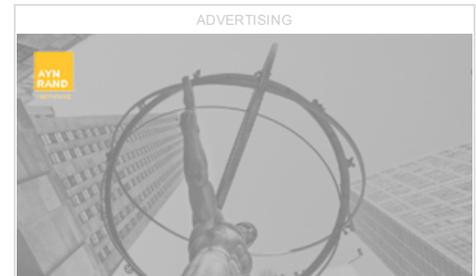
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