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U.S. House OKs interim fix for nearly depleted Highway Trust Fund



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FROM WIRE REPORTS

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WASHINGTON — The House on Tuesday easily approved a short-term fix to the nearly depleted federal Highway Trust Fund, as the prospects of hundreds of thousands of job losses and stalled road construction in August overwhelmed the protests of conservative groups that opposed the bill.

The 367-55 vote was more grudging than it appeared. Democrats, led by President Barack Obama, denounced Congress' failure to pass a multiyear transportation bill that probably would have needed tax increases to fund the nation's infrastructure needs. Conservatives — and some liberal Democrats — called the funding mechanisms for the \$11 billion House bill gimmicks that masked the true cost.

But on Aug. 1, the Transportation Department was prepared to cut construction spending by 28 percent. Without the federal help, states were already planning to halt and delay thousands of projects, putting as many as 700,000 people out of work just as the job market was showing signs of life.

Even the White House got behind the House's stopgap measure, although the president tried to use it as a political cudgel.

"On the whole, this bill is good news for workers and taxpayers, and we appreciate the president's support for our responsible approach," Speaker John Boehner, R-Ohio, said. "We certainly hope he will urge Senate Democrats to pass this bill so we can prevent highway projects from shutting down in a matter of weeks."

Obama, visiting a transportation research center in the Washington suburb of McLean, Va., declined to hand out kudos.

"Congress shouldn't pat itself on the back for averting disaster for a few months, kicking the can down the road for a few months, careening from crisis to crisis," the president told workers at the Turner-Fairbank Highway Research Center. "We should be investing in the future."

Obama's plan

In April, Obama sent Congress a proposed transportation program that would spend \$302 billion over four years, financed both by traditional gasoline taxes and the elimination of some corporate tax breaks. Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., and Sen. Christopher Murphy, D-Conn., also proposed an increase in the gas tax to make up for more efficient cars and trucks that have sapped tax revenue as infrastructure needs have soared.

But Republican leaders have adamantly opposed anything that looks like a tax increase. Few Democrats have embraced Obama's plan in an election year either.

The path to averting a funding crisis now appears clear, Senate Democratic and Republican aides say.

With legislative days running short, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., the majority leader, is likely to ignore the bipartisan highway funding bill that emerged last week from the Senate Finance Committee and put the House's version to a vote, probably just before the long August recess. That would obviate the need for House-Senate negotiations to iron out the differences between the bills.

Conservatives lose

The House's overwhelming passage — 181 Republicans joined 186 Democrats to vote yes — was another in a series of defeats for conservative groups such as Club for Growth and Heritage Action, the political arm of the Heritage Foundation. Both had said they would score lawmakers negatively for voting for it.

The most ardent conservatives have said the highway fund should go broke, and responsibility for highways and bridges should return to state and local governments.

"No one really believes today's bill, which is chock-full of gimmicks and revenue raisers, represents good policy," said Dan Holler, a spokesman for Heritage Action. "But the specter of a crisis, no matter how overstated, occasionally causes solid conservatives to cast votes based on factors other than the underlying policy."

The president's speech Tuesday was part of a week of White House activities intended to focus attention on the roads and bridges debate.

On Monday, the White House released a report on the economic benefits of transportation investment. On Wednesday, Obama will make public comments about the impact of climate change on the nation's infrastructure. On Thursday, he will travel to Delaware to discuss private-sector investment in infrastructure.

Jonathan Weisman and Peter Baker,

The New York Times

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