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## Transportation funding becomes last-minute political football in D.C.



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Congress plans to take five weeks off starting Friday, but a last-minute showdown is brewing between the U.S. House and Senate over transportation funding. The House passed a short-term bill that would fund the Highway Trust Fund earlier this month.

The Senate was expected to essentially sign off. Instead, [Senators yesterday overwhelmingly cut](#) a controversial funding portion of the bill (leaving a \$2 billion shortfall) that would keep the fund solvent only through December and not May, like the House wants. Both options only serve to buy Congress a little time — after November’s mid-terms — to come up with a long-term solution.

CNN’s [Lisa Desjardins](#) has a [good account](#) of what went down yesterday. She reports:

Senators then sent the changed bill back to the House, setting up a likely ping pong volley between the two chambers. Earlier Tuesday Speaker John Boehner, Republican of Ohio, drew a hard line.

“I just want to make this clear,” Boehner said, “if the Senate sends a highway bill over here with (the Wyden-Hatch version), we’re going to strip it out and put the House-passed provisions back in and send it back to the Senate.”

If both chambers don’t agree, states could have problems [paying for current and planned construction projects](#). Think of this as a fiscal cliff for transportation work. It comes when [lackluster federal funding on infrastructure is already costing Texans billions](#) each year in increased fuel prices, car maintenance and lost time.

Reports [Michael Lindenberger](#), one of our Washington, D.C. correspondents:

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx told reporters earlier this month that without an infusion of cash into the account, federal reimbursed due on on-going highway projects will be rationed beginning in early August. If that happens, many states will be faced with shortfalls, and probably work stoppages.

That is not likely in Texas, however.

“TxDOT has short term borrowing capabilities and temporary use of State programs that could be used to help bridge a short term federal reimbursement rationing or stoppage,” said Bill Hale, Dallas district engineer for TxDOT. “However, TxDOT would have to consider more severe measures that would effect our contracts, if the problem lasted more than five or six months.

“I expect the Dallas District will continue normal contractor operations for up to five or six months. We would likely consider more drastic measures after that.”

But the real risk to states like Texas is that without certainty about why the funding picture will look like in the fall, or two years from now, it is increasingly difficult to know which long-term highway projects the state can afford.

And that problem isn’t likely to go away, even if Congress does act to shore up the Highway Trust Fund finances.

The Obama Administration has proposed a wide-ranging bill that would tie highway finances to broader tax reform, and money to the trust fund. It would also do away with a moratorium on tolling interstate highways. Currently, states need a waiver to toll any interstate lanes — even new ones. But under the Obama proposal, that prohibition would go away. The Federal Highway Administration would still need to approve any plans to toll lanes, but even existing main lanes of the interstate system could be tolled under the new rules.

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