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# A primal scream on U.S. transportation funding

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BY MIKE NORMAN  
[mnorman@star-telegram.com](mailto:mnorman@star-telegram.com)

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Warning: This stuff can make you scream.

Congress has to figure out by the end of the month how to keep the Highway Trust Fund from going insolvent. "Has to," that is, because the fund's revenue authority runs out at the end of September, Congress will be on break for all of August, and the Federal Transit Administration says it's going to have to cut back on sending money to states pretty soon in order to keep from draining the kitty dry.

So, like on many other issues lately, we're on the brink of bad things if our federal government doesn't get its act together. But hang on, we haven't reached the screaming part of this yet.

There's a good chance that Congress will meet the deadline. Proposals are in motion in both the House and Senate, and some significant committee action in both chambers took place Thursday.

Good chance, that is, unless the Republican-led House and the Democrat-led Senate get into a fight, and there's a good chance of that, too.

Everyone agrees that this is high-stakes stuff, big money for highway and transit projects in every state.

The last federal transportation authorization legislation, 2012's Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), set aside \$105 billion for federal fiscal years 2013 and 2014.

Texas gets almost 40 percent of its transportation funding from the federal government, \$8.6 billion in the 2014-15 budget.

Most of that is from the Highway Trust Fund.

The trust fund itself, an Eisenhower-era product, has a crumbling foundation. It was set up by the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which created a gasoline tax of 3 cents per gallon.

The tax rate grew to 18.4 cents per gallon by 1993, but it hasn't been increased since then. As the U.S. Chamber of Commerce puts it, "we are trying to run a 2014 transportation system on 1993 dollars."

Texas is no better on that score. Its 20-cent tax on a gallon of gasoline or diesel fuel hasn't changed since 1991.

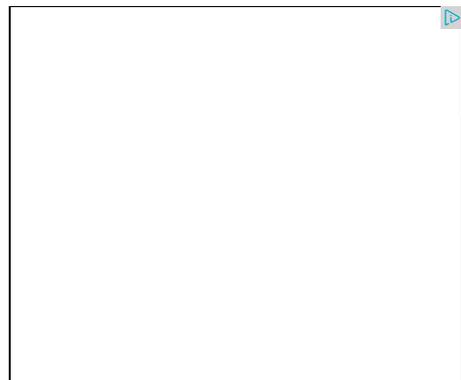
As the pundits say, there's no "appetite" for tax increases in Congress or the Texas Legislature.

There is a hunger for transportation funding, just little consensus on how to satisfy it.

In February, President Barack Obama proposed a four-year, \$302 billion transportation funding plan based mainly on "pro-growth business tax reform." By that, he meant closing business tax loopholes.

He got no support, and now enthusiasm for a multiyear approach has dwindled. A short-term plan is likely, but question is, how short?

Here comes the scream.



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Republicans are coalescing around a bill approved by the House Ways and Means Committee on Thursday, allocating \$10 billion for roads, bridges and mass transit through May 2015.

Democrats favor a Senate Finance Committee version that would extend funding only through the end of the year.

That's seen as a ploy to force a vote on a long-term plan by December.

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce backs the Senate approach, saying "the longer the patch the easier it will be for Congress to kick the can down the road."

Our lawmakers' inability to act on something they all agree is so important is frustrating to the *nth*-degree .

But here's what's worse: Both approaches, in extreme attempts to avoid finally examining the gas tax, depend on revenue sources completely unrelated to transportation: changes in pension laws, hijacking a fund meant for environmental cleanups, altering Internal Revenue Service tax-compliance measures.

Finally, there's this: Those gimmicks require 10 years to make enough money to cover a few months of transportation funding. Still, that's what Congress is going for.

Now scream.

Mike Norman is editorial director of the Star-Telegram. 817-390-7830 Twitter: @mnorman9



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