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My take on Washington cutting highway payments to states

[@gdickson](#)

The battle over highway funding in Congress has become so common that, when something newsworthy happens, it feels like watching a rerun on television. Politics is partly to blame, but it's also true that the federal highway trust fund is dwindling, and those in charge of distributing the dollars day-to-day know something has to be done. As our McClatchy man in Washington reports, the U.S. Transportation Department is notifying states that starting next month their requests for reimbursement of highway expenditures will be cut by an average of 28 percent.

We'll hear more about the cutbacks until Congress eventually passes a new transportation bill. Just like the last funding crisis, and the one before that.

For North Texas, this latest announcement of funding cutbacks isn't likely to slow down many of the current projects underway, such as the \$2.5 billion North Tarrant Express, or the reconstruction of LBJ Freeway in Dallas or Interstate 35W in Fort Worth. Those projects involve partnerships with private corporations. Even if some of the federal money involved in those projects is delayed while Washington sorts out its funding mess, the Texas Department of Transportation will likely shift around money within its own accounts to ensure the work goes on. It won't have much choice.



For readers, the main message to take from the debate over funding is, it has become clear that Congress no longer wants to take the lead in paying for transportation projects. Congress wants the federal government to regulate the road work, and perhaps contribute a small portion of the engineering, design and perhaps construction costs. But Congress and the U.S. Transportation Department want states and major cities to bear a much larger share of the responsibility going forward. This isn't just a passing trend in Congress. It's a permanent shift in federal philosophy, and states and cities should treat it as such.

However, the federal government won't bow completely out of the transportation business. The federal tax of 18.4 cents per gallon on gasoline will continue to be collected, and distributed to states to maintain existing interstates and U.S. highways - and, let's not forget, to buy buses and trains for cities to use as public transit. Transportation advocates often talk about the shrinking supply of federal funds, but the truth is the amount of highway dollars collected and disbursed nationwide is still on an upward trend. People are still buying lots of gasoline. The real problem is, the money just doesn't go as far as it used to.

But what's the big picture? We're no longer living in the Eisenhower era, when Americans could only dream of someday driving smoothly and quickly coast-to-coast, on well-marked and standardized roads. Back then, the military trumpeted the need for a national network of reliable to move its equipment across the country in the event of an enemy attack - and that's no longer a problem either.

Today, we've experienced that dream and awakened from it. Transportation is no longer a national priority, and maybe that's OK. It's just a given in the modern world that roads and bridges are well-engineered and maintained (at least enough to keep them open). Maybe it shouldn't be, but it is. Of course those things take money, too, but the debate about transportation funding isn't as much about a lack of money for maintenance as it is a lack of money for expansion of roads.

Congress' collective decision to get out of the transportation biz comes during a time of tremendous transition for the American worker. Habits are changing. More people are working non-traditional hours, or even at home. Major cities are shifting their emphasis to walkability, cycling, etc. Just look at what's happened in New York during the past decade, with a rather sudden emphasis on bike lanes and enjoyable public space. If you live in an urban area elsewhere in the U.S., there's a good chance that as you're reading this your city planners are working on a similar plan.

Today, schools are as much responsible for the morning rush hour as employers. It's no coincidence that the lines at traffic signals in city neighborhoods are at their longest about 15 minutes before the first period bell rings at the nearest campus - and about 15 minutes after that, as mom or dad drops off the kids and heads to work, the freeway on-ramps are most congested. Eisenhower probably never imagined his interstate highway program would be needed for that.

Over the next 20 to 40 years, the demand for the freeways themselves may completely change. In our new digital world, many jobs can be performed online, pretty much anywhere. This could be good news for depressed rural areas in Texas and elsewhere, which ought to seize the opportunity to experience a rebirth. As more people feel less of a need to live within a 20-minute drive of a downtown area, they will consider moving to places previously thought too far out of the way.

States and cities would do well to consider those possibilities and plan accordingly - without the help of the federal government.

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