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Transportation Secretary warns of dwindling highway funding

February 22, 2014 at 7:44 PM EST



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This week the U.S. Transportation Secretary warned the federal Highway Trust Fund may run out of money later this year. Hari Sreenivasan speaks with Bob Cusack, Managing Editor for The Hill, about the logistics of the fund and how state transportation spending could be affected if Congress fails to agree on a solution.

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HARI SREENIVASAN: The Transportation Secretary of the United States warned this week that the federal Highway Trust Fund could run out of money later this year. What would the implications of that be? For more we're joined from Washington by Bob Cusack,

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he's the Managing Editor for The Hill. So for those not paying close attention, what is the trust fund? And how is it that we got this close to it running out of money again?

BOB CUSACK: Well, it's running out of money because fewer people are driving and basically it's funded by the gas tax and that gas tax goes into this fund and this fund from the federal government goes to states to pay for infrastructure spending. but there's gonna be a short fall and that's causing a lot of concern on Capitol Hill, especially with the transportation secretary. He's urging congress to start thinking about remedies of having to deal with this shortfall, but with partisan gridlock in Washington this is going to be a tough one to solve.

HARI SREENIVASAN: So interestingly enough the AFL-CIO and the Chamber of Commerce both went to the Hill and said we're for an increase in the gas tax, which is incredibly unpopular with Congress.

BOB CUSACK: Absolutely, and that's why the gas tax hasn't been increased for two decades and it's not going to be increased anytime soon. It's a nonstarter in the Republican led house and even though the Chamber of Commerce wants congress to do this, and the administration hasn't gone that far, but the transportation secretary commended the chamber for having the guts to do that. So it's gotten the dialogue going, it's gotten the debate going, but that's not going to be the remedy because that simply doesn't have the votes and Speaker John Boehner is not going to increase the gas tax anytime soon, especially with his Tea Party conference.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Alright, so what are some other possible remedies that could close this gap?

BOB CUSACK: There aren't many. You know transportation spending, the politics of it have changed dramatically since the stimulus, which was a very partisan debate. Before that transportation funding was more of a bipartisan feeling, an initiative. But now I don't know what they're going to do, other than maybe just moving money from the general fund to the transportation fund, which congress has done before, but still there are going to be a lot of conservatives on Capitol Hill who are going to oppose that. But there are not a lot of easy remedies, otherwise they would have already done it.

HARI SREENIVASAN: So what sort of road repairs are affected when this fund is short of money?

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BOB CUSACK: Oh many, across the states and basically what is gonna have to be done is that states are going to have to cut funding for infrastructure projects. So states across the country are gonna have a shortfall, they're not gonna be getting the money they normally get from the federal government, in all likelihood, unless Congress comes up with some big bipartisan agreement and that's unlikely. So the amount of money that states are spending on infrastructure is going to go down, and that's a significant concern, especially in the wake of the storms we've had which have led to a number of potholes across the country. And that's only a small percentage of transportation funding to fix those, but there's no doubt about it, states are going to have to cut the amount of funding they use on transportation.

HARI SREENIVASAN: Alright, Bob Cusack, Managing Editor of The Hill. Thanks so much.

BOB CUSACK: Thank you.

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It should be noted that the automobile is not a stand alone entity, it requires a massive support system. Roads and highways, parking areas, repair stations and fuel stations are just a few of the parts that make up the system. Most vehicles are used on average about one hour a day, this means the rest of their existence is spent in storage.

The space built into, and allowed for in this system is always based on the largest vehicle using that space, even if it occurs infrequently. The issue of how large a vehicle "needs" to be is an area that needs to be addressed and rethought. The article looks at possible ways to lessen and plan to lower the footprint of vehicles.

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