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Congress must accelerate Highway Trust Fund solutions

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The following editorial appeared in the Miami Herald on Monday, July 14:

Congress has roused itself, at the last minute, and now is scrambling to save the Highway Trust Fund. Better late than never. Better still will be if lawmakers agree to come up with the money to prevent the fund from becoming insolvent. It's only a matter of weeks before that happens – and it's the same with lawmakers' August break. If they don't, Americans across the country should expect a bumpier ride as they drive from here to there.

Lawmakers will fail their constituents – and an economy struggling to make a recovery – if they don't act.

The Highway Trust Fund was established almost 60 years ago to finance what was then the new interstate highway system. Its revenue comes from a federal gasoline $\tan - 18.4$ cents a gallon and a diesel $\tan 624.4$ cents a gallon. The billions allocated to the states do far more than help fund road construction, maintenance and improvement projects. The money builds and repairs bridges and other ailing infrastructure, funds rail projects and creates more bike- and pedestrian-welcoming corridors.

In Florida, the fund provides 30 percent of the state's department of transportation revenue.

The problem is, the gas taxes have not been raised since 1993, and inflation has depressed the value of the taxes since then – the money simply doesn't go as far.

The second problem is that this is an election year. Lawmakers will not consider raising those taxes. The best that can be hoped for, therefore, is a stopgap measure to keep the fund from going under. But short-term steps are no substitute for smart, sustainable solutions. Congress should revisit this issue and dig deep for solutions. Sadly, as Bill McKenna, a former Missouri transportation official, told USA Today: "We've kind of given up that anything will happen other than to kick the can down the road longer."

The shame of it is, he's probably right.

Trust fund revenue has also fallen victim to laudable successes in other realms of transportation. First, people are not driving as much. They are working from home, taking public transportation, delaying long road trips because of gas prices. Second, those who get behind the wheel are driving cars that have become much more fuel-efficient during the past two decades.

Each scenario means that drivers are buying less gas and, therefore, paying less into the Highway Trust Fund. Since 2008, Congress has shifted \$55 billion into the fund from general revenue so that it could keep paying the bills.

President Barack Obama this week is urging Congress to continue funding the Highway Trust Fund. Governors should add their voices to his.

In addition to seeking funding, Anthony Foxx, secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation, said the administration hopes to add language that would streamline the review process for infrastructure projects, bringing them to completion sooner. Mr. Foxx said several agencies, including the Army Corps of Engineers and the Environmental Protection Agency, in addition to DOT, must weigh projects carefully before they can proceed. For efficiency's sake, he hopes to install "concurrent reviews, not a relay race."

Good idea. But Congress must get the show on the road first.

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