



## House silent on highway funding



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The House is staying quiet in the debate over a new transportation funding bill despite a flurry of action by senators and the Obama administration.

Senate leaders this week unveiled a six-year, \$265 billion road and transit funding package bill that will be marked up in committee on Thursday morning.

Meanwhile, the administration is pressing for action after releasing its own plan for a four-year, \$302 billion transportation measure. President Obama and Vice President Biden both delivered speeches Wednesday to tout the proposal.

"If they don't act by the end of the summer, federal funding for transportation projects will run out," Obama said in front of the Tappan Zee Bridge in New York.

"There will be no money. The cupboard will be bare. And all told, nearly 700,000 jobs would be at risk over the next year — that's like the population of Tampa and St. Louis combined."

The House has stayed out of the fray, focusing instead on a recent agreement it reached with the Senate on a smaller \$8.2 billion bill to boost U.S. port and waterways.

Transportation advocates say it's time for House Republicans to get engaged in the debate.

"We're now into mid-May, and if the CBO is correct, we're facing an insolvency," AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department President Ed Wytkind told The Hill. "There isn't a big vision out of the House and we need one."

Wytkind was referencing a recent projection from the Congressional Budget Office that the trust fund that is used to pay for road and transit will run out of money by the end of this summer.

The labor leader said the House's inactivity is dampening an otherwise positive week for the funding push.

"The administration is clearly all in, not only on having a bill, but they're using the powerful voices of the president, the vice-president and the [Transportation] secretary to go around the country taking the case to voters," Wytkind said.

Wytkind noted there are big differences between Obama's transportation proposal and the Senate's, including the fact that the president is calling for lawmakers to spend approximately \$25 billion per year more on road and transit projects than the upper chamber is suggesting.

But Wytkind said he was glad the Senate was staking out a position.

"The Senate is finally doing a bill, but it doesn't reflect the administration's priorities because the administration's bill is a significant expansion," he said. "The Senate bill is just adjusted for inflation. It's basically a flat line bill. If combine those two facts, I think it's time for the House to get moving and hopefully they can come up with something big."

The key figure in the House is Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), the chairman of the Transportation Committee. Shuster is facing his primary on Thursday,

and is working to fend off a challenge from businessman Art Halvorson, who has attacked his past work on pricey transportation bills.

Shuster is expected to survive the primary, but transportation advocates are worried that too much time has been lost to pass a large bill before the projected bankruptcy date for the Highway Trust Fund.

"Certainly, I would like to see the House come up with something because my expectation is that whenever Shuster does come up with something, he's going to have a very different perspective [than Senate Environment and Public Works Committee Chairman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.)]," said Joshua Schank, who is president of the independent Eno Center for Transportation in Washington.

Schank said he had "no doubt" that Shuster wants to pass a significant transportation bill during his tenure as House Transportation Committee Chairman. Shuster's father once held the same position in Congress.

But Schank said Shuster is unlikely to go along with anything similar to Boxer's plan.

"It's my impression that he had the intention of making an imprint when he took the [Transportation Committee] chairmanship," Schank said. "I don't think his goal is just 'let's pass another six years of MAP-21, which basically what Boxer is proposing.'"

Shuster's office declined to comment on the highway bill, pointing instead to the upcoming vote on final passage of the port and waterways measure.

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) has said that the lower chamber is waiting to identify a funding mechanism to help pay for transportation projects before it releases a draft of its bill.

The traditional source for transportation funding has been the federal gas tax, which is now set at 18.4 cents-per-gallon. The gas tax has not been increased since 1993, however, and infrastructure expenses are now outpacing receipts by about \$16 billion per year.

The gas tax brings in approximately \$34 billion per year, but the current transportation bill includes more than \$50 billion in road and transit spending. Transportation advocates have said the current funding level is the bare minimum that can be spent to maintain the nation's infrastructure.

The CBO has projected that lawmakers will have to find \$100 billion in revenue, in addition to the gas tax funding, to approve a new six-year transportation bill this year.

Transportation advocates have pushed for a bill that lasts for at least six years because lawmakers approved only a two-year measure in 2012 that is expiring in the fall.

Senators this week said their \$265 billion transportation bill would last six years, but have not yet decided how to pay for it.

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