



LaHood: Congress 'shouldn't be afraid' to increase gas tax



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Former Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Thursday that lawmakers "shouldn't be afraid" to raise the federal gas tax to help pay for infrastructure projects in the United States.

Transportation advocates are pushing Congress to increase the gas tax for the first time in more than 20 years because the Department of Transportation (DOT) has said that its Highway Trust Fund will run out of money by the end of August without congressional action.

The gas tax is the traditional source of revenue for the federal transportation projects. The tax, which is currently priced at 18.4 cents per gallon, has not been increased since 1993, and the 21-year-old hike was not indexed to inflation.

The result of the stagnation has been a transportation funding deficit that has been projected to reach as high as \$20 billion billion next year.

Transportation supporters have pushed to nearly double the gas tax to approximately 33 cents per gallon to help close the shortfall.

LaHood said Thursday that recent polling data has shown that it is safe for lawmakers to support a gas tax increase, citing a statistic that shows that 95 percent of state referendums on transportation funding have passed in recent years.

"Politicians in Washington shouldn't be afraid to raise the gas tax," LaHood said at a press conference at the US Travel Association's headquarters in D.C.

"When people know that money is going to go to fix up the roads in their communities, they're not going to throw politicians out of office," LaHood continued. "They're going to pat them on the back for having the courage and vision to replenish the Highway Trust Fund."

LaHood was in Washington on Thursday to tout a survey of members of the US Travel Association that showed 90 percent of tourism industry members believed it "very likely" or "somewhat likely" that their business would be negatively affected by a transportation funding bankruptcy.

The survey was conducted by the group and Building America's Future.

The Senate has begun working on a six-year, \$265 billion bill to avoid the projected bankruptcy in transportation funding. The measure does not include LaHood's favored gas tax increase, however.

The former Transportation chief said he applauded senators for attempting to craft a resolution to the transportation funding shortfall.

"Sen. [Barbara] Boxer [D-Calif.] has gotten a bill out of her committee," LaHood said of the chairwoman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

By contrast, LaHood said, there was "nothing happening in the House when it comes to the highway bill.

"Nothing introduced, nothing debated, no discussion and we're in a mess," he said. "We really are. The American people get it."

LaHood said Congress was going to have to accept that new revenue would have to be approved to sustain the U.S. transportation system.

"This very, very tough winter that we all experienced has created an America that's one big pothole," he said.

"We need more revenue," LaHood continued. "We need to take the pot of money that built the interstate, that built all of this infrastructure that's now aging and falling apart and replenish it."

TAGS: Highway Trust Fund, Transportation Funding shortfall, Gas Tax, MAP-21 Reauthorization

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