



Jon Stewart tackles highway funding fight

By Keith Laing - 07/17/14 10:54 AM EDT

The Daily Show

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Comedian Jon Stewart weighed in on the fight over federal transportation funding in Congress, criticizing lawmakers on his show on Wednesday night for opting for a temporary spending patch instead of a long-term extension.

Lawmakers have been working on a nearly **\$11 billion** bill that would extend federal transportation funding until May 2015.

Stewart took Congress to task failing to pass a multi-year extension that transportation advocates have argued would allow the nation to make more progress on fixing its aging infrastructure.

"Congress is presented with a pressing problem that requires some money," he said. "We know how this goes. A year and half and two government shutdowns later, and a couple of 80-year-olds are caught trying to break into the World War II Memorial."

Stewart was especially critical of Congress for failing to raise the 18.4 cents-per-gallon federal gas tax, which has been the traditional source for transportation funding.

He noted the gas tax unchanged for more than two decades.

"1993?! For God's sakes, back then gas was a \$1.70 a gallon," Stewart said. "This is easy then. To fund the highways, all you've got to is raise the gas tax. I'm just saying, if you tracked it with inflation it would be up to 30-cents-a-gallon now."

The gas tax as it is currently structured brings in about \$34 billion per year, but the federal government currently spends approximately \$50 billion annually on road and transit projects.

Transportation advocates have said that the current funding level is the minimum that can be spent to maintain the nation's infrastructure network, and they have pushed for a gas tax increase.

Lawmakers have been reluctant to raise the amount that is paid by drivers when they push gas for their cars in the middle of an election year, however.

Stewart said Wednesday night that he agreed with infrastructure advocates that the gas tax should be increased.

"This is so stupid," he said. "We've paid for our highways with the gas tax since the start of the interstate highway system. So basically if we want to get from point A, insolvent trust fund with crumbling bridges, to point B, solvent trust fund with fixed bridges, we can take a direct route raise the gas tax at the rate of inflation. Or make a slight detour through offshore loophole boulevard."

Stewart hammered House Republicans for relying on funding sources like so-called pension "smoothing," which allows companies to reduce the amount of money they pay in their employees' pensions, and boosting customs fees to generate the money for their version of the transportation bill.

"Instead of going directly from point A to point B, or even just taking one minor route, here's what we're doing," he said. "Basically companies are allowed to reduce their pension obligations to their employees, thus giving them a higher profit margin on which they pay more taxes....of course if they were eventually going to make good on those pension obligations, they will get to claim much higher tax breaks in the future and the government will lose that money."

Stewart concluded that "it's crazy how the wealthiest, most power country in the world always seems to be expending all its energy to get