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## Lawmakers Pitch A Gas Tax Hike To Replenish Dwindling Highway Funds

By [SCOTT HORSLEY](#) ([PEOPLE/SCOTT-HORSLEY](#))

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**Transcript**

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

Let's take a closer look now at what's happening to the Highway Trust Fund. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx warned state officials in a letter today that unless the fund is patched quickly, the federal government will start limiting payouts to states on August 1. The average state will lose nearly 30 percent of its federal road money and that could mean a lot less asphalt. NPR's Scott Horsley reports on one idea for fixing the trust fund and the roadblocks in front of it.

SCOTT HORSLEY, BYLINE: There's a simple reason the Highway Trust Fund is running short of cash. The money in that fund comes from the federal gas tax, just over 18 cents a gallon. And as economist Jared Bernstein of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities explains, that tax hasn't changed in more than 20 years.

JARED BERNSTEIN: It hasn't been adjusted for inflation. It hasn't been adjusted for the better mileage of the automobile fleet. It hasn't been adjusted for the fact that people are actually driving a bit less now than they were a few years ago. And because of those three factors, we've got a real problem there.

HORSLEY: To which Democratic Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut has proposed a real solution.

SENATOR CHRIS MURPHY: We can spend the next three years searching for a new magical funding solution but it's likely that the best option is staring us straight in the face.

HORSLEY: Earlier this month, Murphy proposed raising the gas tax by 12 cents a gallon over the next two years. After that, he wants the tax to go up automatically at the rate of inflation. Murphy's co-sponsor is Republican Senator Bob Corker of Tennessee.

SENATOR BOB CORKER: I'm finally just to a point where I realize this cannot go on. I think the best way for the highway program to work is on a user fee basis. That's the way it's been set up.

HORSLEY: Corker and Murphy have proposed corresponding cuts in taxes elsewhere in the budget so lawmakers wouldn't have to swallow an overall tax increase. But Murphy acknowledges it won't be easy.

MURPHY: We recognize that this is a politically difficult issue. That's why there haven't been any bipartisan proposals until today. But we think that now is the time for some political courage.

HORSLEY: So far the idea has gained little traction on Capitol Hill. And it hit a dead end at the White House.

TAMARA KEITH, BYLINE: Would the White House support a higher gasoline tax to shore up the Highway Trust Fund and pay for much-needed infrastructure improvements?

JOSH EARNEST: I believe that's something that we've said a couple of times that we wouldn't support.

HORSLEY: White House spokesman Josh Earnest didn't tell NPR's Tamara Keith why the president is so strongly opposed to raising the gas tax. But any tax on driving has faced a bumpy road in this Administration. When former Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood proposed a mileage-based tax early in Obama's first term, the White House quickly slammed on the brakes. Bernstein, who used to be Vice President Biden's chief economist, understands that resistance, but he doesn't like it.

BERNSTEIN: Look, I used to work in the White House, and I am very aware that there is good policy and good politics, and sometimes the two don't match.

HORSLEY: Bernstein argues raising the gas tax is the most straightforward way to pay for the infrastructure improvements Obama says he wants. The American Automobile Association, which has 54 million members, has endorsed the Murphy-Corker proposal. AAA spokesman Michael Green says politicians who oppose the higher gas tax are being shortsighted.

MICHAEL GREEN: We're going to see a situation where voters are increasingly angry about long commutes, unsafe conditions and more and more potholes.

HORSLEY: Bernstein adds, no one in his right mind believes you can keep funding a healthy transportation network with a gas tax that hasn't budged in 21 years.

BERNSTEIN: People are not dumb. Go forth. Make the case. Make it strongly. And you might lose, but at least try.

HORSLEY: Despite the president's appearance on the Key Bridge today, though, and the salute to Star-Spangled Banner author Francis Scott Key, there's little sign this summer Washington is the home of the brave. Scott Horsley, NPR News.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

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