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Transportation

Transportation funds key to healthy economy, U.S. Chamber exec says in Dallas

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After Congress' continued failure to fully fund the nation's infrastructure needs, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's transportation chief hopes a bill passed by a Senate committee Wednesday is a step toward a long-term solution.

But Janet Kavinsky admits there's one big hill to climb before the bill can help solve the country's infrastructure funding woes.

"The issue is the revenue," Kavinsky said. "Where are we going to come up with nearly \$100 billion?"

Kavinsky discussed the bill and myriad other transportation issues with area business leaders at the Dallas Regional Chamber on Wednesday. In an interview after that closed-door meeting, Kavinsky said her organization supports raising the federal gas tax drivers pay at the pump to help fill the gap. Yet, she also quickly pointed out the near political impossibility of such a tax hike becoming a reality.

"We're open to discussions, but there's just not a lot out there that is really transportation-related," she said of federal revenues.

Congress for years has struggled to fund long-term transportation needs. Lawmakers have continuously passed short-term extensions to highway funding legislation, but Kavinsky

said several legislators are growing weary of another short-term patch for highway funds that are set to run out at the end of next month.

“It’s coming to a point where Congress has to do something,” she said.

She cheered the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee’s passage earlier in the day of a bill that would boost spending on highway projects for six years and give state and local governments more flexibility to spend federal money on local projects.

The bill, which hasn’t yet been funded, would increase spending by about 3 percent a year and would also provide new funding to improve freight delivery.

“Our nation's roads and highways have suffered under too many short-term extensions, which have led to higher costs, more waste, and less capability to prioritize major modernization projects to address growing demands on our interstates,” said Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

Kavinoky said that Dallas leaders asked during the closed-door meeting Wednesday afternoon about how much federal agencies spend on transit vs. highway construction, the possibility of speeding up projects’ environmental review and how officials can encourage the use of technology to solve transportation issues.

The transportation director said the vast majority of U.S. consumer products and services come from outside the country, meaning transportation is a key part of the economy. Congestion and poor mobility end up costing more than keeping up with transportation demand would cost, she said.

“We can either bleed money out of the economy or we can use transportation investment to boost it,” she said.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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Gene Harrison

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1. Fast track the High Speed Rail to Houston. BTW Make sure is is truley High Speed (300 MPH)
2. Build Cross Town DART service and keep the focus inside 635.
3. Build fast express comuter rails to the Dallas downtown hub from downtown McKenny, Denton, Mesquite and Greenville.
4. Build DART stations where people live/shop/work. Not just somplave where no on will complain.

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