

Business, labor groups urge more road, bridge spending

Bart Jansen, USA TODAY [\(\(staff\)2126/bart-jansen\)](#) 5:49 p.m. EDT May 12, 2014



(Photo: Susan Walsh AP)

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WASHINGTON — Business and labor groups kicked off a week of dire warnings and noisy jackhammers to promote highway and bridge construction Monday, to overcome congressional reluctance to boost funding for the projects.

"If we don't do anything, nothing is going to happen," Thomas Donohue, CEO of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, said on a panel at the Newseum. "All of us have got to go up and explain to our representatives that we're so glad to have them — and we need the money, or we might not keep them."

In the same vein, Laborers' International Union of North America announced Monday a \$1 million campaign in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Michigan for radio ads and billboards to highlight the costs and safety perils of deteriorating highways and bridges.

The radio ad, featuring jackhammers, says the country doesn't need another bridge collapse like Interstate 35 in Minneapolis in 2007, which killed 13 people. Billboards say potholes cause injuries and prompt \$80 billion in auto repairs.

"We're not trying to scare people — we are trying to inform the American public," said Terry O'Sullivan, the union's general president.

Construction funding is urgent because the highway trust fund is projected to run out of money for new projects in August.

The size of the shortfall is uncertain, depending on construction spending and tax revenues. The Transportation Department projected in March a \$700 million shortfall by September. But the American Road and Transportation Builders Association expects Congress will need to provide \$16 billion to cover the shortfall. States are expected to halt or postpone projects at that point, which business and labor groups say would eliminate jobs and hurt the economy.

Even if lawmakers plug the shortfall of billions of dollars this year, a broad spectrum of business, labor and state governmental advocates are urging Congress to create a new funding source for highway and bridge construction that would last four or five years. A long-term bill is important because states must budget for projects months or years in advance.

To promote the need for repairs, advocates cite a study of Federal Highway Administration data that 63,000 bridges nationwide need repairs. AAA, the automobile club, estimated that poorly maintained roads cost each motorist an extra \$324 each year for repairs and operating costs.



FILE - This Aug. 3, 2007, file photo shows divers during recovery efforts following the 35W bridge collapsed in Minneapolis. (AP Photo/Minneapolis Star Tribune, Jim Gehrz) MANDATORY CREDIT; ST. PAUL PIONEER PRESS OUT; MAGS OUT; TWIN CITIES TV OUT ORG XMIT: MNMIT501 (Photo: Jim Gehrz AP)

Pete Ruane, CEO of American Road and Transportation Builders Association, said the funding solution can't be "one of the mystery-meat proposals that are out there — not one-off stuff, real money the states can plan on over a sustainable period of time."

Funding is contentious because the highway trust fund has traditionally been funded by a gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon, a rate set in 1993 that hasn't keep pace as cars became more fuel efficient. But raising the gas tax or overhauling the corporate-tax code — as President Obama proposed instead — is unlikely in an election year.

Major business and labor groups have endorsed a boost in the gas tax.

"Increasing the gas tax, however, is going to require some courage, which seems in short supply in Washington these days," Donohue said.

The congressional impasse left a range of predictions.

Jay Timmons, CEO of the National Association of Manufacturers, said at the Chamber panel companies will educate their lawmakers about the variety of funding sources available and follow their votes.

"It's very frustrating for manufacturers to have this skepticism coming from certain quarters of Congress about a basic function of United States government," Timmons said.

But Deborah Wince-Smith, CEO of the Council on Competitiveness, said the debate this year might simply set the stage for the 2016 election.

"I'm not as optimistic that they're going to do anything big," she said. "I think they're going to do some incremental things around the margins."

An advocacy group called Building America's Future, which was founded by former New York mayor Michael Bloomberg, former Pennsylvania governor Ed Rendell and former Transportation secretary Ray LaHood, created a mobile app called I'm Stuck for people to report traffic congestion in notes forwarded directly to their members of Congress.

The week of advocacy coincided with the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee planning a vote Thursday on a highway bill, but without deciding on additional funding.

Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx released similar legislation recently for \$302 billion in projects over four years, with \$150 billion anticipated from a corporate-tax overhaul that lawmakers consider unlikely to be completed this year.

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