

# The clock is ticking on fixing U.S. roads and bridges



Larry Copeland, USA TODAY 5:54 p.m. EDT June 17, 2014

*Washington's troubles over transportation funding might not seem so distant and esoteric to Americans come summer vacation: They could find themselves stuck in massive traffic jams.*



(Photo: Patrick Semansky, AP)

Most Americans agree many of the nation's roads and bridges need to be improved or replaced, but paying the bill is another matter.

The national transportation funding quandary in Washington probably seems esoteric and distant to most people outside the Capitol Beltway. That could all change this summer and fall.

If Congress fails to authorize a transportation funding bill and address the looming insolvency of the Highway Trust Fund, families hitting the road for vacation could find Washington's transportation trouble brought home in a very real way: They could encounter seemingly endless traffic backups at roads and bridges that local

governments have no money to repair.

Nearly half — 45% — of all public roads and 39% of bridges in the USA are built and maintained by counties; the federal government owns just 3% of all roads, according to the National Association of Counties (NACo). Uncertainty over how to pay for roads and bridges is felt at the county level, says Matthew Chase, executive director of the organization.

"We want long-term certainties," he says. "These projects take years and sometimes decades to build. If you don't know what your funding is going to be over a four- to six-year window, it's very difficult to make investment decisions."

At issue: the future of the Highway Trust Fund and congressional re-authorization of Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21).

The trust fund is funded primarily by the federal gas tax to provide federal matching dollars to state and local governments for major projects. It has been limping along for years. Congress hasn't raised the gas tax since 1993 and Americans are driving less, in more fuel-efficient cars. The fund's buying power is further being eroded by inflation. Without Congressional action, it's likely to start running out of money this summer, and those federal matching dollars will stop.

MAP-21, which has provided for \$105 billion in federal transportation funding since it became law in July 2012, will expire Oct. 1 unless Congress reauthorizes it.

Late last month, Republican leaders in the House of Representatives proposed eliminating first-class and bulk-mail delivery on Saturday by the U.S. Postal Service, providing a savings of \$10 billion over 10 years. That would be used to cover the shortfall in the trust fund and possibly a short-term extension of MAP-21.

Last month, the White House sent Congress a \$302 billion, four-year transportation funding plan, the Grow America Act. Other proposals being discussed: raising the federal gas tax, implementing a tax on vehicle miles driven or tolling interstates. A survey last week from auto club AAA found that 68% of Americans say the federal government should spend more on roads, bridges and mass transit. The national survey of 2,013 adults, which had a 2.6% margin of error, found that 5% say the government should spend less.

Transportation funding is "a complex beast," says Daniel Papiernik, an associate vice president and tolling expert with infrastructure solutions firm HNTB. "And there's no one silver bullet that's going to slay the beast. It's going to require all the tricks in the book."

One wild card that could stall congressional action on transportation is the primary defeat of House Majority Leader Eric Cantor, R-Va., on June 10. That loss to a Tea Party candidate could make other Republican House members leery of compromise in general, says Jonathan Adkins, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association.

Among projects that would be imperiled if the Highway Trust Fund slides into insolvency:

- The Lexington Avenue interchange project on state Highway 36 in Ramsey County, Minn. Lexington Avenue is an important roadway that carries about 85,000 vehicles daily through that interchange, according to NACo.

•More than 50 bridge projects in Pennsylvania, which leads the nation with more than 5,200 bridges in need of repairs. The biggest of those projects is the \$105 million Hulton Bridge Replacement over the Allegheny River in Oakmont; a delay in that project would not only inconvenience motorists but would hammer the local economy, NACo says.

The loss of a vital bridge or other transportation project can reverberate across a region, lengthening commutes, putting a damper on vacation trips, stealing precious time from beach or mountain frolicking.

Just ask motorists on Interstate 95 or I-295 in Delaware.

Both routes are experiencing frustrating delays because state officials closed a stretch of I-495 on June 2 that carries 90,000 vehicles daily after support columns on a bridge at the Christina River tipped by as much as 4 degrees.

The bridge is likely to remain closed through the summer.

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