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The Post's View

Mr. Obama's risky transportation plan

By Editorial Board, Published: March 9

EVEN THOUGH both parties would prefer to stop legislating until Election Day, reality will intercede here and there. One case in point: The country needs to pay for its roads, rails, bridges and ports, but transportation funding is again approaching a crisis point.

President Obama weighed in recently, promising a crowd in St. Paul, Minn., that he would "send Congress a budget that funds rebuilding our transportation infrastructure in a more responsible way." The plan he sent lawmakers may be more responsible than the patch that Congress applied to the system a couple of years ago, but that's hardly impressive. In fact, Mr. Obama carefully avoided policies that would really fix the problem.

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The country needs its transportation funding to be sufficient, long term and predictable. The president's case is that he's at least addressing the first two criteria, proposing a \$302 billion plan that would run for four years. That would be a significant funding increase from current policy, and it would last longer than the two-year bill lawmakers approved in 2012. But Mr. Obama would rely on a one-time windfall from corporate tax reform, rather than a consistent, dedicated stream of funding. Fully half the funding for Mr. Obama's plan would come from that one-off source.

Office of Management and Budget Director Sylvia Mathews Burwell told us that it makes sense to fund a surge in transportation spending with a one-time windfall in revenue. We disagree. Historically, the United States has built and maintained its transportation infrastructure via a trust fund that's continually replenished. Adequate, long-term and reliable funding allows states to plan and

Alex Smith-Bingham,
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implement multi-year projects without costly delays, and it helps the government attract good contractors to do the work — not just the ones willing to tolerate the risk of political deadlock every time the transportation budget needs another patch.

The traditional source has been the federal gasoline tax. Beyond predictability, this has had a range of positive effects: Those who use the roads have had to pay for them, which is fair and combats overuse. But lawmakers haven't raised the gas tax for two decades, and drivers of contemporary, fuel-efficient cars buy less gas anyway. Congress could easily fix the first issue: Raise the gas tax and replenish the trust fund.

The president is right to push for more infrastructure spending and to stretch it out for several years. And maybe Congress is more likely to approve some sort of corporate tax reform than it is to raise the gas tax, though that's debatable. But raising the tax is far better policy. The president ought at least to have the intellectual honesty to say so.

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809212876 wrote:

3/9/2014 9:49 PM CDT

The Federal gasoline tax was never indexed for inflation, hasn't been raised since 1993, and inflation since 1993 has reduced the buying power of that tax by at least one third.

This is Congressional dereliction of duty.



jvhealey1 wrote:

8:35 AM CDT

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