

GovBeat

# State lawmakers are in D.C. for a (nearly) impossible task: Persuading Congress to do something

By **Niraj Chokshi** July 10 at 12:59 PM  [Follow @NirajC](#)

(Reed Saxon/Associated Press)

A crew of state lawmakers from across the nation is spending Thursday in Washington to ask Congress to do something.

The eight state legislators are in town to meet with their federal counterparts — as well as White House and Transportation Department staff — to coax out an extension of highway funding, which [the administration says](#) will begin to dry up next month. The issue is a top priority for state legislators, Bruce Starr, a Republican state senator from Oregon and the president of the bipartisan National Conference of State Legislators, told a handful of reporters ahead of the group's meetings on Capitol Hill and at the White House.

The politically sensitive federal gas tax — which hasn't been increased in more than two decades — is a key source of income for the Highway Trust Fund, which helps states pay for highway, bridge and transit projects. As a result, federal lawmakers have had to come up with increasingly creative and difficult ways to keep it solvent. In a [letter this week](#) to the leaders of each party in both houses, NCSL and six other state and local associations called on Congress to agree on a long-term solution. If Congress fails to act, the fund will begin to dry up, forcing state transportation officials to stop or alter plans for new projects. In Oregon, the Transportation Department has plans to halt all new projects, Starr said.

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“[In] West Virginia, it’s the same thing,” state Sen. Robert Plymale (D) said. “They put a halt on new ones. But existing, they told contractors that they can proceed, but we can pay as we go as the money can come in.”

The lawmakers from eight states shared their frustrations Thursday morning, noting how long-term uncertainty about the status of the fund, which [provides most states](#) with about half their transportation funding, can create months-long delays in some places and have economic ripple effects.

“In a state like Indiana, where you have a window of construction — six months usually, six-seven months if you’re lucky — then when we have to start canceling projects, which is what we’re going to do in Indiana as a result of all of this,” Indiana state Rep. Terri Austin (D) said. “You can’t just pick those back up when Congress says, ‘Oh, yeah, we’re going to solve this.’”

The private sector can spend significant time bidding and preparing for projects, only to be told it has to wait for funding to come through, she said. “It really creates an unhealthy process.”

Years of federal gridlock have also led some states to prepare better contingency plans.

“In Utah, over the last three years, we convened a committee specifically to address the projected scenarios — what happens if all federal funding dries up, what does a state do?” said state Sen. Curt Bramble (R). “It’s broader than just transportation.”

An expansion of Interstate 15 — the largest infrastructure project in Utah’s history — was funded entirely by the state “because we couldn’t rely on the federal government,” Bramble said.

The other state legislators on the D.C. visit are Sens. Scott Dibble (D) from Minnesota, Ellen Roberts (R) from Colorado, Michael Vehle (R) from South Dakota and John Watkins (R) from Virginia.

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Niraj Chokshi reports for GovBeat, The Post’s state and local policy blog.

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