Senate moves to patch transportation funding

By **Ashley Halsey III** July 29 at 10:25 PM ✉

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The U.S. Senate Tuesday gutted a House bill to temporarily extend transportation funding, plopped in its own revenue-raising plan and added a political twist to the traditionally bipartisan issue.

Fearful they may lose the Senate in November, Democrats want to force Congress to come up with a long-term method to pay for transportation funding in the lame duck session. Republicans, hopeful they will be in control next year, want to set a May 31 deadline for the task.

"It's our responsibility to act in this Congress," said U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin (D.-Md.). "We have five months left. It would be wrong for us to pass just the patch and not the six-year reauthorization."

Though the Senate came up with a wider variety of
funding options for their stop-gap funding bill, the real
issue was striking the House deadline so that Congress is
forced to act before it adjourns for the winter holidays.

The issue is of mind-numbing complexity and might be
ignored were it not for the fact that, without a temporary
funding extension and then a long-term plan to find new
revenue, federal money to build and maintain the nation's
roads, bridges and transit systems will begin to run dry in
August.

The Highway Trust Fund that relies primarily on fuel
taxes no longer brings in enough cash to pay the bills
submitted by the states. The White House has warned
that it will run into the red next month, requiring an
immediate infusion of money to keep current projects
going, and then a creative way to bring in more revenue
for the long haul.

The 18.4-cents-per-gallon federal gas tax that has not
been raised since 1993. Inflation and fuel-efficient
vehicles have eroded revenue from the tax.

The overarching issue in the transportation debate is one
with partisan philosophy at its roots.

Democrats believe that the federal government should
continue to play a central role in transportation planning
and funding. Many Republicans adhere to the belief that
it's time for Washington to step aside, a process known as
devolution that allows states to raise and spend

transportation money unfettered by federal restraint.

"The transportation issues we see today are at the local level and there is no need for the federal government," said U.S. Sen. Mike Lee (R-Utah), arguing for a federal role limited to maintaining the interstate system. "Washington is standing in the way. All we add to the process here in Washington is unnecessary overhead."

U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer (D.-Calif.), whose committee reported out a bipartisan six-year policy plan for transportation that awaits floor action, responded that few state governments share Lee's vision.

"Some people call it devolution. I call it complete and utter distruction of a system that states have come to rely on," Boxer said. "They count on the basic bread and butter of these [federal] grants."

Take a step back from the transportation debate per se, and the partisan debate reflects divergent viewpoints on whether centralized government should be maintained near current levels or scaled back in size.

Republicans who advocate devolution, many of them from more rural states, want states to make their own decisions on whether to pay for transit systems, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and roadway landscaping mandated primarily to control erosion.

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