

Transportation legislative highlights

Written by Vicki Needham
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Several avenues have emerged for lawmakers to move forward with highway and transit infrastructure spending but lawmakers continue to wrangle over specifics.

In the near-term, \$50 billion to \$100 billion in spending for shovel-ready projects could be included in a multi-pronged "jobs bill" under development.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.) is eyeing a \$70-billion package of ready-to-go projects set out by groups such as the American Public Transportation Association, representing regional transit agencies, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. The groups recently outlined 9,500 ready-to-go projects – \$15 billion in transit and \$48 in highway projects.

The Obama administration, which at first appeared to reject the inclusion of infrastructure spending in a jobs bill, announced a \$50-billion proposal earlier this week for transit, roads, bridges and ports.

Timing on a jobs bill is still unclear.

Senate leaders have said they'll take up a measure in January while House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said this week that the House may move before the holiday recess. He also suggested that infrastructure spending will likely come in several stages across multiple economic stimulus measures in what he sees as an effort to maintain employment and jobs.

Another House proposal floating around would shift \$100 billion from the general fund to shore up the Highway Trust Fund, covering the first two years of Oberstar's six-year bill while a financing mechanism is worked out to pay for the entire measure.

The idea to front-load the larger bill has gained support from several governors including Pennsylvania's Ed Rendell (D) and California Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger. But some highway groups are concerned that the move would give appropriators too much control over transportation spending, according to a recent CQ story.

House leaders and Appropriations Chairman David Obey (D-Wis.) are taking the lead on the jobs bill and would likely control the amount of infrastructure spending, according to an Oberstar spokesman.

Still looming is another extension to the 2005 federal transportation law before current stopgap funding expires Dec. 18, the only funding option right now with a hard and fast deadline.

On that front, there still isn't any consensus on how to move forward.

Senate Environment and Public Works Chairman Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) is pushing for a six-month extension while Oberstar is trying to forge an agreement that would include a promise to consider the larger bill within at least that six-month time frame.

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Oberstar is in talks with the Senate on not just the length but what should be included in the extension, according to a spokesman. Oberstar has an “open mind” but he wants a solid proposal before he agrees to anything.”