

## On highway and mass transit funding bill

# Congress kicks the can down the road — again

WASHINGTON, D.C. (PAI)—Amid grumbling about Congress' tendency to "kick the can down the road," lawmakers last month passed a two-month extension of the highway and mass transit trust fund. President Obama signed the extension just days before the federal gas tax was set to expire—May 31.

The stopgap highway bill will allow infrastructure and mass transit projects to continue until the middle of the summer without Congress having to come up with any new money.

For the last 12 years, Congress has failed to come up with a long-term funding plan. Instead, they have relied on short-term extensions. This last go-round, lawmakers were unable to reach agreement on a seventh-month patch.

Unions reluctantly backed the extension to July 31.

"It is a sad state when a two-month legislative extension is a victory," said AFL-CIO Transportation Trades Department President Ed Wytkind. "But we called for this action. A short-term bill gives a chance to build momentum around a longer-term funding bill that gives states and businesses the certainty they need, boosts middle-class job creation, and ends

the mindless, short-sighted game of patchwork extensions."

"Americans can't get away from the crumbling state of our infrastructure," added Laborers President Terry O'Sullivan. He calculated infrastructure repairs employ one of every nine construction workers. "Members of Congress can't get away from their responsibility to do something about it. It's time to stop kicking the can down the road, and fix the road."

The Obama Administration has proposed a six-year, \$478 billion plan called the Grow America Act. Obama wants to replenish the highway trust fund through a 14 percent tax on foreign earnings held overseas by U.S. companies.

Unions, led by the Laborers, support increasing the 18.4-cents-per-gallon gas tax, which hasn't risen since 1993.

The gas tax currently covers only about \$34 billion of the \$50 billion the federal government spends each year on roads.

Republicans, who control both the House and Senate, say there's no chance that an increase of the gas tax can make it through Congress.

"This is a heck of a way to run a great nation," said U.S. Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-

Oregon), the top Democrat on the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee. He indicated Democrats went along with the patch out of necessity—and demanded lawmakers craft a long-term bill with a gas tax hike.

"Our system is falling apart. 140,000 bridges need repair or replacement. Forty percent of the surface of the national highway system is in such bad shape that we have to dig up the roadbed and resurface. We have an \$86 billion backlog in transit just to bring the existing transit systems up to a state of good repair," DeFazio said.

But Congress is "kicking the can," as DeFazio put it, because lawmakers refuse to tackle the highway-mass transit trust fund's problems.

The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is expected to mark up a six-year highway policy bill in late June.

"If lawmakers squander the chance this summer to craft a bipartisan, long-term bill that expands funding, the nation will be doomed to years of transportation decay and gridlock with no end in sight. And the voters will be left with no one to blame but the people they send to Washington," Wytkind said.

## Longshore workers ratify 5-year deal

SAN FRANCISCO—West Coast longshore workers ratified a new 5-year contract with employers represented by the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA).

Members of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU) voted 82 percent in favor of approving the agreement, which will expire on July 1, 2019. The previous contract was ratified in 2008 with a vote of 75 percent in favor.

The new agreement provides approxi-

mately 20,000 good-paying jobs in 29 West Coast port communities. The ILWU said the contract will maintain "excellent health benefits, improve wages, pensions and job safety protections; limit outsourcing of jobs, and provide an improved system for resolving job disputes."

ILWU International President Robert McEllrath said negotiations for the contract "were some of the longest and most difficult in our recent history."

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