



June 18, 2009

Oberstar, Mica Plan \$500B, 6-Year Transportation Reauthorization

By JOSH VOORHEES, [Greenwire](#)

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee wants \$500 billion over the next six years for the nation's roads, transit and high-speed rail, according to a blueprint of the bill that committee leadership hopes to pass before the current highway authorization expires at the end of September.

Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.) was scheduled to outline the proposal this morning at a press conference, but the release was postponed until 2 p.m. today to accommodate a series of House votes.

But a copy of the [17-page proposal](#) (pdf) shows that Oberstar and ranking member John Mica (R-Fla.) are calling for a \$337 billion investment in highway construction, \$100 billion for public transit and \$50 billion for President Obama's vision of a nationwide high-speed rail system. The remaining \$13 billion is for a variety of smaller initiatives.

The proposal is set to be released one day after Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood asked the committee to postpone its plans to overhaul the nation's transportation system by 18 months, and to instead extend the current authorization in an effort to prop up the cash-strapped Highway Trust Fund, which is set to run aground by August.

Oberstar's white paper, dated today, lays out the case against a temporary extension, something he has said he will attempt to block in an effort to force lawmakers to get down to the business of reauthorization.

"In the past, during these periods of multiple short-term extensions of the programs, state departments of transportation have slowed investment because of the uncertainty regarding the long-term future of the program, and been unwilling to invest in large, long-term projects until enactment of the reauthorization act," the blueprint says. "In this time of severe economic recession, the effects of any slowed investment could offset much of the benefits of the increased transportation investment provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act."

The \$500 billion bill is significantly more than the current \$286 billion authorization and the

\$236 billion that the Highway Trust Fund revenues can afford, according to the blueprint. Still, the draft does not lay out how Congress will find the cash to pay for the spending -- something that has been a major concern among lawmakers, DOT officials and transportation trade groups.

The Oberstar-Mica proposal calls for a set of national transportation goals, including to improve metropolitan mobility, "lessen environmental impacts from the transportation network," and improve the sustainability and livability of communities.

The bill will also call for streamlining DOT, cutting more than 75 federal programs and consolidating highway funding under four core formula categories: critical asset investment, highway safety improvement, surface transportation, and congestion mitigation and air quality improvement, or CMAQ.

As part of its goal to expand mobility for goods and people, the proposal would establish a "metropolitan mobility and access" program to provide dedicated funding to help the nation's largest cities address congestion, a "projects of national significance" program to fund high-cost projects for goods and freight movement, and a "high-speed rail initiative." The programs would all be eligible for funding from a newly created "national infrastructure bank," which will "provide grants and credit assistance, including secured loans, loan guarantees, and standby lines of credit, as well as allocations of tax-exempt private activity bonding authority and tax-credit bonding authority."

The blueprint proposes creating an Office of Livability within DOT's Federal Highway Administration, to "establish a focal point within FHWA to advance environmentally sustainable modes of transportation, including transit walking, and bicycling."

The bill would require the transportation planning process to consider the greenhouse gas emissions from the sector. "The Environmental Protection Agency, in consultation with DOT, will establish national transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals," the proposal states.

It would also create an undersecretary of intermodalism and an Office of Expedited Project Delivery to "improve the project delivery process by eliminating duplication in documentation and procedures and expedite the development of projects through the environmental review process, design, and construction."

Oberstar and Mica have vowed to pass a bill by the end of September. But with the reauthorization competing with sweeping climate legislation, health care reform, and a Supreme Court nomination for Congress' attention, the Obama administration and many lawmakers doubt the highway and transit bill could be signed into law anytime soon.

LaHood asked lawmakers yesterday to essentially extend the current spending bill for another 18 months in order to prevent the Highway Trust Fund from running dry. "Our No. 1 priority will be to work with all of you to plug the Highway Trust Fund, to find a way to do it and find a way to pay for it," LaHood told a Senate appropriations panel this morning.

LaHood originally called for the 18-month bill to come with some reform, but when pressed today by Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), he granted that any major changes to the bill would be difficult, given the tight time frame lawmakers are working with. "I believe we can have discussions, whether we get to the point where we can include these as part of the fix of the the Highway Trust Fund? We'll have to see," he said.

Murray, who chairs the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee, doubted that even a short-term fix will be able to move in time, given everything on Congress' to-do list for the five weeks before it leaves for August recess.

"I'm very concerned that with the Highway Trust Fund being put into the mix of some policy discussions, it won't see the light of day," she said.

[Click here](#) (pdf) to read the 17-page blueprint.

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