



## Our View: Enough of the games; Congress should pass transportation bill

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At the end of this month, federal money runs out for building and repair of the nation's transportation infrastructure unless Congress moves to continue it. If once upon a time federal highway bills enjoyed bipartisan support, now "bipartisan" is a profanity on Capitol Hill and all bets are off.

Republicans specifically are holding up the bill on three fronts, between objections to its potential cost, their insistence on a balanced budget amendment vote, and their concern about burdensome-on-business regulations of the kind enforced by the Environmental Protection Agency, which some believe needs to be tamed or put out of its misery altogether. Of course, you might say that the latter two don't have anything to do with roads, bridges and railways, and you'd largely be right. Welcome to ideological Washington, where everything, anymore, is about something else.

In the past it was always a given that the nation needed to invest in its infrastructure, because bad things happen when you don't. Bridges have been known to collapse. People get hurt and property gets damaged. Doing nothing is not really a budget savings because the problems don't go away, and fixing what's broken always costs more than pre-emptive maintenance. It produces jobs. That's how President Obama can say "this isn't a Democratic or a Republican issue, it's an American issue." That's why the White House considers extension a "no-brainer." That's why Congresses have renewed road funding seven times in the last two years. That's why the president characterizes a failure to do so as "inexcusable" and unthinkable now.

Of course, we used to think bringing the nation to the brink of default was unimaginable, too.

Two bills are out there. One in the Republican House would pay for infrastructure needs over six years - as once was customary - but cut annual allocations by 30 percent, to a little more than \$38 billion annually, \$230 billion total. The other in the Democratic Senate would continue funding for two years at \$55 billion annually.

The Transportation for Illinois Coalition, of which Peoria's Heartland Partnership/Chamber of Commerce is a member, much prefers the latter, while hoping Congress can take the next two years to hash out a more thoughtful approach to the nation's transportation needs that gets back on that six-year track.

It's not hard to see why. The Federal Highway Administration estimates that nearly 17,000 jobs and \$481 million-plus in funding stand to be lost in Illinois alone if the GOP plan takes effect. Nationally, it's nearly half a million jobs. It's not just construction work - where unemployment tops 15 percent - but the private sector overall counts on reliable infrastructure to get its employees to work, its goods to market. "It's an investment that drives other investment," says the local chamber's Roberta Parks. It would be a double hit on Peoria, home to Caterpillar Inc., which makes the equipment that builds those roads and bridges.

It's worth noting that the 18.4-cent-per-gallon federal gas tax is set to go away at the end of September, as well, which might be cause for applause in some quarters. That would be a short-term gain, long-term loss. First, the tax generates some \$1 billion every 10 days; once gone, those dollars can't be recovered, says the White House, though the infrastructure problems remain. With the escalating cost of gas, those revenues have already dipped because Americans have found ways to cut their consumption. Meanwhile, the gas tax has lost about half its purchasing power in the last 20 years, with significant inflation in the road-building industry; asphalt is a petroleum-based product, after all.

In short, Americans can pay now, or pay more later.

Politically, this is a no-winner for those who would take this down to the wire or beyond. Unemployment in America tops 9 percent, and this would exacerbate it. The stock market has been suffering palpitations virtually every other day. It's not often that union and chamber of commerce types see eye to eye, but they do on this issue. Whose job approval rating is worse than the president's? If Obama has been polling in the low 40s, Congress has consistently scored no better than one-third that, with Republicans generally faring slightly worse than Democrats. Anyone on Capitol Hill who thinks this stand will play well with a majority of the electorate ought to get a check-up from the neck up.

That this is playing out to be another debt-ceiling scenario speaks volumes about Washington. The matter will likely have a prominent place in Obama's jobs address to the nation on Thursday. Republicans could take this issue out of his arsenal before that. Perhaps our own Congressman Aaron Schock could be a voice of reason in prevailing upon the leadership to do so.

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