

# Transport Topics **Online**

Updated:

## House OKs Highway Plan

### Bill Extends Funding 3 Months; Goes to Senate

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The House of Representatives last week approved a three-month extension of the current highway funding law, over the objections of many House Republicans who said the bill was a step toward raising fuel taxes.

But 86 Republican representatives bucked their party leadership and voted for a bill introduced by Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.) that would keep highway funding at current levels, under a procedure that required a two-thirds House majority.

Almost half of the GOP members backed Oberstar's bill; current legislation expires when the federal fiscal year ends Sept. 30. Later in the week, House and Senate leaders also agreed to continue all federal government spending for 30 days.

Although many House Republicans said they opposed higher fuel taxes, business groups earlier had said they would support higher fuel levies to pay for transportation improvements, and backers of the extension plan said it would not raise fuel taxes.

Oberstar, who has pushed for a six-year bill to overhaul U.S. transportation spending, said Sept. 23, "There has been a failure of political will in various quarters," referring to the inability of the Democratic House, Senate and White House to agree on a long-term highway bill.

The Obama administration, supported by Senate leaders, has requested an 18-month extension of current law to permit legislators to focus on other issues, including health-care reform.

"Along the way, there was a stumbling down the street from here at the White House that resulted in asking for an 18-month extension of current law, and then the other body fell in line with a request for an extension of 18 months," Oberstar said. "That's not what we need in America."

The extension was thought to be headed for smooth passage until Republican leaders came out in opposition.

Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.), the top-ranking Republican on the transportation committee, said, "I am not opposed to a three-month extension; but . . . my leadership has requested . . . the opportunity for our side of the aisle to express itself."

House Minority Whip Rep. Eric Cantor (R-Va.) said he was opposed to the bill because he said it would eventually lead to raising fuel taxes.

Cantor said he knew Oberstar "has made very clear his desire to pass an increase in the gas tax to fund a multiyear reauthorization bill," noting the three months would "seemingly buy time to bring the parties together to the table to agree on

a gas tax.”

“What we are asking for is a public rejection of increasing the gas tax,” Cantor said. “We say ‘No’ to higher gas taxes.”

But Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), chairman of the highways subcommittee, said Cantor “can try and change the subject about some future possible increase in gas tax or user fees. That is not what is before us today.

“Our economy is teetering, and they want to play politics . . . They want to jeopardize it. They want to delay it,” DeFazio said.

The extension passed 335-85.

Oberstar’s push for a six-year, \$450 billion bill was bolstered earlier in the week, when several business groups said they’d agree to raising fuel taxes if the bill made changes that cut congestion and trimmed other costs.

“If the government will give us good policy, a refined federal role, a focus on fixing the problems that cost business a lot of money, that drain our economy and steal dollars out of Americans’ pockets, we’ll support increasing the gas tax and diesel taxes to pay for” it, said Tom Donohue, president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. “A lot of people will say that’s a tax increase; correction — that’s a user fee.”

American Trucking Associations President Bill Graves said the federation was willing to weigh paying more because, “while all of those are technically taxes, of course we really do view them as investments in the nation’s infrastructure.”

The three-month extension must now go to the Senate.

Just before press time, House and Senate leaders agreed on a temporary spending bill to continue funding the federal government past Sept. 30, in lieu of passing a number of annual appropriations bills that have stalled in the Senate.

The “continuing resolution” would keep the government functioning through Oct. 31, and would extend transportation funding for 30 days.