

CQ

Boehner Downplays ‘Stimulus’ of Highway Bill

Wednesday February 1, 2012

By Nathan Hurst, CQ Staff

House Republican leaders worked Wednesday to sell their five-year, \$260 billion highway bill to a caucus wary of anything that smacks of big-spending economic “stimulus” legislation.

On the eve of what promises to be a contentious Transportation and Infrastructure Committee markup of the bill (HR 7), aides to several freshman Republicans said the leadership was ratcheting up pressure to back the bill — even as several GOP-leaning policy groups came out against the legislation.

In pitching the bill to the House Republican Conference on Wednesday, Speaker John A. Boehner made the unusual argument that spending money on highway projects under a bill he calls the “American Energy and Infrastructure Jobs Act” would not create jobs.

“We are not making the claim that spending taxpayer money on transportation projects creates jobs,” the Ohio Republican said, in remarks prepared in advance of the meeting. “We don’t make that claim and we won’t make that claim. What makes this a jobs bill is that it removes government barriers that are getting in the way of economic growth.”

While downplaying the direct stimulative effect of government infrastructure spending — a 2007 Federal Highway Administration study found that every \$1.25 billion in federal spending on transportation infrastructure supports 35,000 jobs — Boehner instead stressed features of the bill more appealing to tea party followers and deficit hawks. Those include provisions to streamline environmental approvals, eliminate duplicative and wasteful programs and expand oil and gas drilling on public lands and federal waters.

Those provisions were not enough to win the support of conservative policy groups such as the Heritage Action for America, the Club for Growth and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, which criticized the Republican leadership’s bill.

“Supporters of the bill will claim that there are plenty of positive reforms in the bill,” Club for Growth leaders said in a key vote alert sent Wednesday morning. “But it’s still a remarkably bloated and inefficient piece of legislation.”

Heritage Action said the measure was “a missed opportunity to begin devolving transportation authority back to the states” and would create a “massive budget gap.” The Competitive Enterprise Institute said using royalties from an expansion of energy production to help fund the

measure would violate the “user pays” principle established with creation of a Highway Trust Fund in the 1950s bankrolled primarily with motor fuels taxes.

While drawing criticism from the conservative policy groups, Boehner and Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John L. Mica, R-Fla., also probably cannot count on any help from Democrats. In addition to their policy objections, House Democrats complain they were cut out of the process of fashioning the bill.

“There hasn’t been a single damn hearing,” said Massachusetts Democrat Jim McGovern, a senior member of the Rules Committee.

McGovern said he was working with fellow Democrats on amendments targeting provisions in the bill that they oppose, including provisions to allow bigger and heavier trucks on federal highways and to cut Amtrak funding by 25 percent.

Democrats on the Transportation panel remained largely quiet on the bill, although an aide said members were working on a strategy for offering amendments at the markup Thursday.

Boehner reminded members of his caucus Wednesday that he has never voted for a highway bill and was among just eight members who voted against the 2005 surface transportation law (PL 109-59). He said this proposal is different because it includes no earmarks and no new taxes. He acknowledged that the new oil and gas royalties would not be enough to fill the gap between Highway Trust Fund resources and authorized spending, and he said there would be a short-term “plug.”

Boehner said the bill would cut project approval times in half and empower the states.

He said that “doing nothing is not an option” and that without legislation the Highway Trust Fund will run out of money next year and highway spending would then be limited to gas and diesel tax receipts.

“Whether we like it or not, the reality is that dealing with our nation’s crumbling infrastructure is part of the responsibility of governing,” Boehner told the GOP conference.

Boehner also said that under the two-year, \$109 billion Senate bill (S 1813) approved with bipartisan support in November by the Environment and Public Works Committee, the Highway Trust Fund also would run dry by the fall of 2013. The latest short-term extension of surface transportation authorization (PL 112-30) expires at the end of March.

Safety Concerns

Highway safety groups focused their criticism on a provision that would allow trucks as heavy as 97,000 pounds — with special permits for some as heavy as 126,000 pounds on some stretches — to use the nation’s highways.

Just a day after the AAA motor club president praised the introduction of the House bill as a step toward an ultimate agreement with the Senate on highway funding, one of the group's safety advocates called the heavy truck provision unacceptable.

"There is simply too much at stake here," said Jill Ingrassia, who called for further research.

Joan Claybrook, a former National Highway Traffic Safety Administration administrator who now serves as chairwoman of Citizens for Reliable and Safe Highways, said Wednesday she met with Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood and urged him to publicly oppose the GOP bill, particularly over the truck weights issue. She said another meeting with LaHood is set for later this month.

Claybrook also is urging President Obama to issue a veto threat on the bill and said she doubts any highway bill will be enacted this year.

"I don't think anything in this bill is on [the administration's] agenda," Claybrook said. "We're rearing for a fight here."