

# White House Says Transportation System Overhaul Must Wait

By Alec MacGillis  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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After rejecting criticism that it is taking on too much, the Obama administration has identified one area where ambitious reforms will have to wait: overhauling the nation's aging, congested and carbon-emitting transportation system.

The current six-year, \$286 billion transportation spending plan expires in October, and House members have worked for months to produce a 775-page, \$500 billion bill that would create a new fund for road repairs, increase funding for rail and public transit and include reforms meant to wean the country from fossil fuels.

But it became clear at a contentious Senate hearing yesterday that the half-trillion-dollar question is how to pay for the bill. The 18.4-cent federal gas tax has not been raised since 1993, and revenue from it falls increasingly short every year because of inflation and the shift to more fuel-efficient cars.

Some in Congress, state governments and even in the freight-trucking industry believe the time has come to consider a greatly expanded revenue source, whether a higher gas tax or more tolls, or a shift to a "vehicle miles traveled" fee, which drivers would pay based on how much they drive.

The White House and some of its Senate allies are letting it be known, though, that this is not a discussion they want to have now, in the middle of a recession and as Washington is consumed with battles over health care and energy. Also, polls show that Americans are growing anxious about government spending.

Earlier this year, when they were criticized for not allocating enough stimulus dollars for transportation, administration officials said their transformative plans would come in the six-year renewal bill this fall.

But now the administration is telling Congress that it wants to extend the current spending plan by 18 months -- past the 2010 elections. That will require Congress to provide a \$20 billion patch to continue funding at current levels, because the Highway Trust Fund, supported by the gas tax, is expected to run dry next month. The administration hopes it can attach some initial policy reforms that would benefit big metropolitan areas and public transit. But the broader transformation should wait, officials say.

"President Obama does have a vision for transportation. It's not something he's going to ignore or turn a blind eye to at all," Transportation Secretary [Ray LaHood](#) told skeptical senators yesterday. "The timing is where we part company."

Despite the White House's call for delay, House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman [James L. Oberstar](#) (D-Minn.) is pressing ahead with his bill. He and his House allies argue that states and cities need a new long-term bill to be able to plan capital projects, and that the Washington Metro crash offered further proof that a badly frayed infrastructure needs serious attention now.

[Rep. Peter A. DeFazio](#) (D-Ore.) is proposing that if the White House and the Senate will not consider a higher gas tax, then the bill could be paid for with a new tax on oil speculators.

[Rep. Elijah E. Cummings](#) (D-Md.) said: "President Obama said to us during the campaign that we must have the fierce urgency of now. And that's what Mr. Oberstar has done."

The debate flared yesterday at a hearing before the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee. Chairman [Barbara Boxer](#) (D-Calif.), who is focused on passing a climate bill, said she favors the 18-month patch, and most members present agreed. But [Sen. George V. Voinovich](#) (R-Ohio) protested, saying that a delay would duck the hard questions and that Americans would be willing to pay higher gas taxes for better transportation and new construction jobs.

"The way to get the job done is to pass a bill now. Urgent. Get it done," he said. "What the country needs to know is that in the next five-year period, we're going to make a comprehensive commitment to infrastructure, including high-speed rail, highways and the rest of it. . . . Can you imagine what that would mean in terms of our economy and it giving people confidence in where we're going?"

Boxer agreed but said a gas tax increase now is not feasible. "I would tell you if you go out to the people of America and say that's the solution, I don't think they will buy it," she said. "They're struggling right now."

Meanwhile, the Highway Trust Fund needs an additional \$6 billion to get through the summer. Administration officials say they are looking for ways to pay for a patch other than general revenues, while Republicans are arguing to use stimulus money. Senators want the patch passed without any policy reforms, but public transit advocates say the reforms cannot wait.

Virginia Transportation Secretary Pierce R. Homer said it would be "devastating" to states if the fund ran out, forcing the shutdown of road projects for which they expected reimbursement. His Oklahoma counterpart, Gary Ridley, agreed, but added that however the patch is handled, federal lawmakers and administration officials need to confront the long-term problem of a gas tax that no longer covers the country's needs.

"They have to come up with a new system," he said. "None of [the options] will be popular. But it's absolutely necessary."

