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THE WEEK AHEAD: HIGHWAY TALKS MOVE INTO WEEK THREE

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Negotiations in Congress about a new federal transportation bill are moving into their third week.

Lawmakers who are participating in the 47-member conference committee expressed optimism about the prospects for an agreement following behind-the-scenes talks last week.

"We've already had 20 hours of meetings, staff-to-staff," Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) said last week during the first of what she promised would be regular updates on the progress of the negotiations.

"We're working on the substance of the bill," Boxer said. "What we're doing now is walking through the bill and getting the areas of agreement."

One of the biggest areas of disagreement between the Republican-led House and the Democratically-controlled Senate has been the inclusion of a provision mandating the approval of the Keystone XL pipeline, but there have been indications the provision might not survive the negotiations.

"There are many other parts of it, so I am not going to take a Sherman-esque stand one way or the other," Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) told The Hill last week.

The Senate's version of the broader transportation bill is a two-year, \$109 billion measure. Boxer's counterpart in the House, Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) tried similarly to shepherd a five-year, \$260 billion version of the transportation bill through the House, but was unsuccessful.

The House instead passed a pair of short-term extensions of current law that provides funding for road and transit projects.

Boxer said talks need to progress quickly for lawmakers to finish a bill by June 30th, when the short-term extension of transportation funding will expire.

Additionally this week, the Intelligent Transportation Society of America will hold its annual meeting Monday through Wednesday in National Harbor, Md. Speakers will include White House Chief Technology Officer Chris Vein and University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) Director Peter Sweatman.

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