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GRIDLOCK, ON ROADS AND IN HIGHWAY BILL TALKS, MARKS MEMORIAL DAY HOLIDAY

By Keith Laing
The Hill
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Drivers heading south from Washington on Interstate 95 for the start of the traditional summer tourism season this weekend will be driving on what traffic tracking firm INRIX calls the fourth worst highway in America.

They will also be leaving behind negotiations in Congress on a possible transportation funding bill that some observers say could come to a standstill just as quickly as the traffic they will likely encounter over the long holiday weekend.

"We have a huge infrastructure crisis that's going to be on a lot of people's minds this weekend and all they see is that Congress can't do anything about it," said Parris Glendening, president of the Smart Growth America Leadership Institute and a former governor of Maryland.

"The only thing they're going to hear, if they are paying attention at all, is that the bill doesn't have its act together," Glendening added. "They're going to be sitting there on I-95, in the gridlock just before and after Richmond, and it's going to be frustrating."

Members of the 47-member committee of lawmakers who have been trying to work out a deal between the House and Senate on transportation spending for the better part of a month have sounded more optimistic.

Sen. Barbara Boxer (D.-Calif.), told reporters this week "approximately 80 percent" of the bill was non-controversial.

"This is a very substantial report I'm giving you."

Boxer's committee is attempting to meld a two-year, \$109-billion transportation bill that was passed by the Senate with two temporary extensions of current funding that were approved by the House.

Glendening said Friday that he did not think committee members would ultimately be successful.

“They’ll probably (do) something because it would be such a disaster if they did nothing (but) I think it’s going to more extensions,” he said. “I’m not an expert, but I think it’s going to be a series of extensions through the elections.”

As the conference committee works to negotiate a compromise, Glendening said he wished Congress would consider the road condition that will greet travelers as they head for beaches and other vacation spots.

“I understand politics, but I wish people would think about the millions of families who are going to be really inconvenienced this travel weekend,” he said.

Lawmakers have until June 30 to reach a deal before the scheduled expiration of the current funding for road and transit projects. The House has passed a subsequent extension through the end of September, but that measure would also have to be approved by the Senate to become law.

Expressing confidence that a deal on the broader transportation bill was within reach, Boxer said members of the conference committee were aware of the nation’s transportation problems.

“I think you all know what’s at stake, I’ll just sum it up,” Boxer said in her press conference. “Three million jobs. We already know we have about two million created in our (Senate) bill, and a million would be created because of the expanded (Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act) program.”

Boxer said the conference committee was making “great progress” on the transportation bill and vowed the panel would complete negotiations before the current funding for road and transit projects runs out.

"The conferees are fully engaged. We will have our conference report ready to circulate among the various colleagues by early June and we intend to have this bill on the desk of the president before June 30," she said.

Chris Plaushin, director of federal relations for the AAA, said his organization shares Boxer’s positive outlook on the highway talks.

The auto club “continues to be encouraged by what we believe is progress by members of the conference committee,” Plaushin said in a statement to The Hill. “We hope that members will return from Memorial Day break well-rested and ready to complete a transportation bill that benefits the country.”

But even if they do, Innovation NewsBriefs editor Ken Orski said it will not be like the big transportation bills of yesteryear.

“The federal-aid transportation program will surely continue but there is a growing sense among the lawmakers on Capitol Hill that Congress may be forced to abandon the practice of multi-year

authorizations," Orski, a former transportation staffer in the Nixon and Ford administrations, wrote in a recent blog post.

"The prevailing fiscal and political environment makes it difficult if not impossible to raise hundreds of billions of discretionary dollars in a single legislative package," he continued. "The fact that the Senate has barely scraped up enough funds for a two-year bill while the House has been unable to come up with any plausible funding for its five-year bill, suggests that the days of multi-year transportation authorizations may indeed be over."

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FINDING THAT PAY-FOR SWEET SPOT

National Journal – Transportation Experts Blog
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At what has become her weekly update on the transportation conference committee, Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., last week said conferees are making steady progress toward a compromise bill that renews federal surface transportation authority for the first time in roughly three years.

About 80 percent of the Senate bill is "non-controversial," she said. Consolidating programs? They found agreement on that. Strong financing provisions? Everyone's on board. Eliminating earmarks? Got it. Pay-fors? They reached compromise on that, too, Boxer said.

"From what I know, I think they found a very sweet spot, a good way to pay for this that will gain very, very broad support among Republicans," Boxer said in the middle of her 20-minute press conference on Wednesday.

Whatever that "sweet spot" is, the pay-fors in a compromise bill will still most likely closely resemble what's in the current Senate bill, a fact underscored by the Joint Committee on Taxation's Friday release comparing the revenue provisions in the House and Senate bills, showing that, well, the House bill doesn't have any.

But the Senate bill isn't free from controversy. Critics complain it uses offsets over the next decade just to fund a year and a few months. And the Senate bill draws \$2 billion in 2012 and another \$2 billion in 2013 "out of money in the Treasury not otherwise appropriated." There is no dedicated source of funding; it comes from a variety of places.

The Highway Trust Fund is clearly unsustainable, but is this the new normal? Is this simply the future of infrastructure investment? Or is there a politically viable alternative to what amounts to Congress searching the couch cushions for funding whenever transportation authority comes up for renewal? Is a dedicated fund still necessary? If so, what could it look like?

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PROGRESS ON HIGHWAY BILL BUT KEYSTONE UNRESOLVED

By Roberta Rampton

Reuters

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Lawmakers on a U.S. Senate-House committee are making progress on finalizing a transportation spending bill, Senator Barbara Boxer said on Wednesday, although a provision that would fast-track the Keystone XL crude pipeline is still unresolved.

The committee's starting point is a two-year, \$106 billion bill to fund road, bridge and rail projects passed by the Senate in March.

Republicans have insisted that the legislation include approval of the Canada-to-Texas Keystone oil pipeline, which President Barack Obama put on hold earlier this year after environmentalists raised concerns.

In a weekly update on the closed-door negotiations on how to advance the bill, Boxer, the Democratic chairman of the Senate-House panel, said she was more optimistic than ever that a deal could be reached by a June deadline after discussing the bill with Republican House Speaker John Boehner on Tuesday evening.

"He (Boehner) is working to make sure we get this done, and that is the best news I have heard in a long time," Boxer said, without addressing specifics of the thorny points of the talks.

"Our conversation was really good. Nobody brought up any quote-unquote 'sticking points.'"

In a statement, Boehner said Keystone remains a priority.

"I'm hopeful that the negotiators can complete work on a conference agreement that includes Keystone and other energy measures to address high gas prices and create jobs," Boehner said.

Boxer added that she was determined to push through a bill that would pass Congress and be acceptable to Obama, who has said he would veto a bill that overturned his decision on TransCanada Corp's project, which he has said needs more environmental review before it can proceed.

"I've said from the start: I'm not going to produce a bill that's going to be vetoed, and I'm not going to produce a bill that's going to be a controversy, because it won't go through," Boxer, a Democrat,

If lawmakers cannot agree on the bill, they could craft another short-term extension of funding. But a trust fund that helps pay for highway repairs will run out of money in the fiscal year that begins October 1.

Boxer said a symbolic vote held on Friday in the House of Representatives, which is controlled by Republicans, showed there was not a two-thirds majority in the House needed to overturn a presidential veto on the Keystone issue.

The non-binding vote, which passed 261-152, urged the panel to include Keystone in the highway bill. Twenty-six Democrats voted in favor of the motion, while 151 Democrats opposed it.

"I thought it was good that they had (the vote) actually, so that we can see there wasn't enough to override a veto. So it was instructional," Boxer said.

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ALTRIA'S NEW CEO, CHAIRMAN SETTLES INTO ROLE

Convenience Store News

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Martin J. Barrington has taken his seat as chairman and CEO at The Altria Group Inc. He formally took title to roles at the company's 2012 Annual Meeting of Shareholders last week.

"I am very excited about Altria's future," Barrington said at the annual meeting. "The company has a unique combination of terrific and profitable brands, a strong and diverse balance sheet and truly talented people to drive growth into the future. I'm honored to have the opportunity to lead this company."

Barrington succeeded Michael E. Szymanczyk, who announced in January he would retire immediately following the May 17 annual meeting, as CSNews Online previously reported. Szymanczyk joined the company 23 years ago and served as chairman and CEO of Altria for four years, and president and CEO of Philip Morris USA (PM USA) for 12 years.

The board of directors was ready for his retirement, immediately revealing a succession plan was in place. That plan called for Barrington to move to chairman and CEO and David R. Beran to be Altria's president and COO.

"I am very pleased that our board has elected Marty Barrington to succeed me as chairman and CEO," Szymanczyk said. "And I am equally pleased that they have elected Dave Beran to work with Marty as president and chief operating officer. Marty and Dave have made significant contributions in a variety of roles over the years. Their talent and experience give the board, and me personally, great confidence in their ability to lead Altria through its next phase of growth."

Barrington joined Altria in 1993. His previous positions at Altria Group include vice chairman and executive vice president; and chief compliance and administrative officer. Previous to those positions, he was general counsel and senior vice president for Philip Morris International; and general counsel and senior vice president for PM USA.

Before joining Altria, Barrington practiced law in both the government and private sectors. He serves on the board of directors of the Richmond Performing Arts Center, the boards of trustees for the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts and The College of Saint Rose, and on the advisory board of the Points of Light Institute. He is also a former Commissioner for the Virginia Port Authority.

As president and COO of Altria, Beran also oversees PM USA, U.S. Smokeless Tobacco Co., John Middleton, Altria Group Distribution Co. and Ste. Michelle Wine Estates. He also leads the marketing and consumer research, procurement and information services organizations at Altria Client Services.

Beran joined Altria 1976. His previous positions at the company include vice chairman for Altria Group; executive vice president and chief financial officer for Altria; executive vice president and chief financial officer for PM USA; and executive vice president of finance, planning and information for PM USA.

In the community, he serves on the board of directors for the Richmond Ballet.

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