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House Approves \$819 Billion Economic Recovery Bill *\$30 Billion Proposed for Highways; \$12 Billion for Mass Transit*

By LUCAS WALL
Senior Editor

The House of Representatives this evening approved 244-188 an \$819 billion economic recovery bill after accepting three transportation-related amendments on the floor and voting down two others. The House-approved version contains \$30 billion for highways, \$12 billion for mass transit, \$3 billion for airports, and \$1.1 billion for Amtrak and intercity passenger rail.

“We applaud the House leadership, House members, and the Obama administration for today’s passage of an economic recovery bill that includes \$46.1 billion for transportation,” said John Horsley, executive director of the American Association of State Highway & Transportation Officials. “This investment can give state departments of transportation and local governments the ability to make smart investments and generate hundreds of thousands of jobs in communities all across this country.”

Rep. Jerold Nadler, D-NY, successfully added \$3 billion to the \$9 billion originally proposed for mass transit. It was the only amendment permitted on the floor that added funds to the overall package, bringing its cost from \$816 billion to \$819 billion. The amendment adds \$1.5 billion for transit capital formula funds and \$1.5 billion to the New Starts program, which helps fund construction of new rail-transit and bus-rapid-transit lines. Nadler’s amendment was cosponsored by Reps. Peter DeFazio, D-OR; Dan Lipinski, D-IL; Michael McMahon, D-NY; and Keith Ellison, D-MN.

“People all over the country realize that investment in transit is one of the smartest things we can do to create jobs, reduce congestion, reduce use of foreign oil, and spur economic growth,” Nadler said.

Rep. Jerry Lewis, R-CA and ranking minority member of the House Appropriations Committee, opposed the amendment. He urged representatives to vote “no” because the extra transit dollars would increase the bill’s cost and thus the federal budget deficit.

The House adopted Nadler’s amendment by voice vote.

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF STATE HIGHWAY AND TRANSPORTATION OFFICIALS

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JOHN HORSLEY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A final Republican motion to rewrite the bill to add \$36 billion in highway funding and \$24 billion for Army Corps of Engineers infrastructure projects while slashing about \$160 billion from other programs failed 270-159. Lewis and Rep. John Mica, R-FL and ranking minority member of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee, sponsored the motion. They spoke out in favor of adding more infrastructure funding while cutting other areas they said would not stimulate the economy.

“These are absolutely shovel-ready infrastructure investments that will put America back to work now,” Lewis said.

Mica crossed the aisle and spoke from the Democratic side, urging his colleagues to invest more in highways and water infrastructure.

“We have an opportunity to double the amount of infrastructure money in this bill,” Mica said. “Right now we need to get the most people to work as soon as possible.”

But House Appropriations Committee Chairman David Obey, D-WI, objected to the motion. Obey said he might support the proposal for extra highway funding if it didn’t also strip out money for dozens of other programs including job training, energy efficiency improvements to federal office buildings, community health centers, and National Science Foundation programs.

States Must Obligate Half of Highway Funds Within 90 Days

Cleared by voice vote was an amendment offered by House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee Chairman James Oberstar, D-MN. It would reduce the time in which states must obligate half their transportation recovery dollars from 180 days to 90 days.

During floor debate on his amendment, one of 11 authorized by the House Rules Committee, Oberstar urged members to speed up the “use it or lose it” provision for half the bill’s highway, transit, rail, and aviation funding. The House Appropriations Committee last week had approved an amendment to change the original period for obligating funds to 180 days after apportionment from 120 days. But Oberstar has insisted that states must move more quickly, obligating their funds in 90 days to get “ready to go” projects under contract swiftly.

Rep. Tom Latham, R-IA, spoke against the Oberstar amendment. The Congressional Budget Office reviewed the proposal and concluded “it will not make a lick of difference in how quickly these funds will be spent out,” he said. “We’re asking states to make hurried judgments. I expect states to make wise judgments.”

Oberstar responded the CBO has not spoken with state transportation officials, who have assured him “they have committed to have projects obligated or under contract in 90 days for the first \$15 billion of this highway funding.” The T&I Committee will hold hearings every month to monitor the rapid disbursement of recovery dollars to transportation agencies, he added.

States Must Spend Recovery Dollars in Addition to Their Existing Transportation Budget

The third transportation-related amendment approved by voice vote clarifies that federal funds received by states under the bill for highways shall not be used to replace planned state expenditures. The amendment, offered by Rep. Bill Shuster, R-PA, provides that if a governor fails to certify that the state will maintain its previously scheduled efforts on transportation spending, the state would lose its funding under the bill. The reported bill contained a provision requiring such certification from state governors, but contained no forfeiture of funds. The “maintenance of effort” requirement has been pushed by the

transportation construction industry, which wants to ensure that federal funding does not replace planned state funding.

“If the state budgets \$1 billion for highway spending and they are to receive \$1 billion from the federal government, they can’t move that money around, reduce what they have budgeted for their funding of highway and transportation projects,” Shuster said.

Oberstar supported the amendment, noting the purpose of the bill is to create jobs and it’s critical for federal recovery dollars to supplement, not replace, money states had already planned to spend on transportation projects.

No members spoke against the Shuster amendment.

Finally, the House rejected 320-116 an amendment by Rep. Jeff Flake, R-AZ, to strike \$850 million in Amtrak funding.

Senate consideration of the recovery bill is expected next week.

“The Senate must move swiftly and decisively to approve its economic recovery package and reconcile any differences with the House version to meet President Obama’s Feb. 16 deadline for passage of a final bill,” Horsley said. “Time is of the essence and our state DOTs are already working to make certain that once a final bill is signed into law, they will be ready to go, starting the hundreds of construction projects that will help to turn our economy around by putting Americans back to work.”

Sunny Schust contributed to this story
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