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State Transportation Officials Set Course for Federal Program Reform

State transportation officials this week called for major reforms, accountability, and increased federal funding for the nation's transportation programs as Congress considers authorization legislation in the coming year.

Meeting in Hartford, Connecticut on Monday, the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials approved a slate of recommendations for next year's authorization of federal highway and transit programs. The current legislation expires September 30, 2009.

"This is not business as usual," said AASHTO President Allen Biehler, Secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. "The American public has every right to see what they will get for increased transportation investment. We have to be accountable and we have to move to a performance-based program focused on national goals. That's where state transportation leaders want to go."

The comprehensive multi-modal package of recommendations urges that the federal program go "back to basics" by focusing on areas of national interest – preservation and renewal, interstate commerce, safety, congestion, system reliability, and enhanced environment and quality of life.

Increased federal funding would be coupled with national performance standards established to achieve the national goals. States would self-define targets that would deliver accountability for the investment of federal funds.

Among the goals called for in AASHTO's new transportation agenda are:

- Increasing funding for congestion relief projects and metro areas;

- Improving highway connections and transit access for rural America;
- Doubling transit ridership to 20 billion by 2030, and 50 billion by 2050;
- Trimming 6-12 months from project delivery time by expanding state environmental responsibilities and integrating planning;
- Dedicating federal funding for a fast and reliable intercity passenger rail network;
- Reducing highway traffic fatalities by half in two decades; and
- Moving as swiftly as practical from current funding methods to a distance-based user fee.

Reform proposals

The AASHTO recommendations call for:

- Streamlining of the current number of federal programs and concentrating 90 percent of federal dollars on “core programs” distributed to the states;
- Capping earmarks at no more than five percent of the federal program;
- Expanding the current congestion air quality program to include climate change initiatives;
- Creating a new “operations” program to fund low-cost, rapid deployment projects to reduce delay and improve reliability of the system;
- Providing dedicated federal funding for a national intercity passenger rail system including high speed rail corridors, regional corridors, and long distance service;
- Addressing expanding freight transportation needs through planning and investment programs; and
- Boosting transit funding and ridership while streamlining the federal program structure and grant processes.

\$545 Billion Six-Year Multi-modal Program Needed

Emphasizing the need to employ every kind of transportation to meet future demands, AASHTO calls for an overall \$545 billion investment from 2010 through 2015 for highways, transit, freight movement, and intercity passenger rail. Included are the following:

- \$375 billion for highways,
- \$93 billion for transit,
- \$42 billion for freight improvements (from sources outside the Highway Trust Fund), and
- \$35 billion dedicated funding for intercity passenger rail.

The proposal identifies a number of possible funding options for consideration by Congress and calls for maximum flexibility for state and local governments in the way the funds are used.

The policy positions approved by the AASHTO Board of Directors are available online at <http://downloads.transportation.org/2008policy.pdf>.