

The Future of the U.S. Highway System:  
A look into the grave situation facing our roadways

White Paper  
By: Andrew Gillman

## **I. A brief history of U.S. roadways**

On June 29, 1956, President Eisenhower signed a bill that helped to create our national interstate system that we know and love today. Known at the time as The National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, the roadways were modeled after the German Autobahn. To Eisenhower, the U.S. Highway system was essential to protecting citizens during the Cold War. His vision was that if necessary, American citizens needed a quick and easy way to evacuate cities and allow the military to move in.

Not only did the National Highway System help ease the minds of American citizens during the Cold War, but the project also proved to be a main pillar of economic growth for the United States. The history of the U.S. roadway creation in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century accomplished much of the same things that the nation's railway system did in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, but with a much more widespread influence. Both systems provided people with unprecedented mobility, and both positively impacted the country's economic situation.

## **II. Expiration of SAFETEA-LU and subsequent extensions**

The Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (commonly referred to as SAFETEA-LU), was a funding authorization bill signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2005. The bill provided \$286.4 Billion to improve and maintain surface transportation in the United States, with a large portion of that amount going towards the country's interstates. The law expired on September 30, 2009, and since that time, Congress has been bumping along with a series of extensions. Since its expiration, Congress has extended SAFETEA-LU a total of eight times, with the last extension set to expire March 31, 2012.

Congressman John Mica, (R-FL), Chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee supports a long-term version of SAFETEA-LU as opposed to a series of extensions. "Nothing is going to put people to work like a major transportation bill for this country," he adds. Many transportation experts also agree with Congressman Mica that a long-term bill needs to be passed to go towards fixing the National Interstate System, and spurring job creation in the United States. The Catch-22 in

this situation however, is that without the extensions, many road and bridge infrastructure projects would come to a complete halt. Extensions are not the ideal situation under which to work, so the hope for many in the industry remains that Congress and the President can work together to nail down a multi-year, long-term bill before the next extension expires.

Industry experts agree on the positive effect a bill will have on the economy. For every \$1 billion spent on infrastructure, 28,000 jobs are created annually, with \$6.2 billion going right back into the struggling U.S. economy. Standard and Poor's also offers some eye-opening facts regarding the transportation industry. They claim that for every dollar invested in highway construction, it generates \$1.80 of GDP in the short term. The facts cannot be denied – road construction helps the economy.

### **III. The challenges facing our roadways**

The current situation facing this country's roadways is dire. With a network of four million miles of public roads, and approximately 594,000 bridges, federal funding is a key resource to keep these lifelines of commerce operable. However, efforts to maintain U.S. roadways are falling short of acceptable.

The American Society of Civil Engineers (ASCE) gave the roads and bridges in this country a grade of D-minus in their last study. The National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission came to the conclusion that over the next 50 years, the government needs to invest at least \$225 billion annually to bring the transportation system up to a reasonable level. The ASCE also mentions that to have U.S. roadways brought up to "good" conditions, the government would need to provide \$2 trillion over the next 5 years.

The shocking statistics surrounding U.S. road infrastructure don't end there. One fourth of America's bridges are rated as structurally deficient and in need of repair or upgrade. Transportation experts across the political spectrum agree that this should be a high priority for the U.S. government considering that in the past 40 years, dozens of bridge collapses have occurred resulting in hundreds of fatalities.

The U.S highway system is already years past due for a serious upgrade. At this point, we are about 35 years overdue for rebuilding our current roadways, let alone extending our infrastructure with our growing population. Initially, the highway system built by President Eisenhower was only built under the assumption that after 20 to 25 years, it would be replaced.

In addition to safety issues, failing roads and bridges have monetary implications. The total economic cost of motor vehicle crashes in 2000 was \$231 billion.

#### **IV. Bills on the Hill**

Currently, there are two versions of a long-term comprehensive transportation bill that U.S. lawmakers are considering; the House bill, and the Senate bill. Historically speaking, both Republicans and Democrats have found some common ground on the subject of transportation, touting that it creates jobs, and boosts our economy. Unfortunately for the time being, it appears that partisanship is king, and as a result of that, a compromise is being delayed. For the 5-year, \$260 billion bill in the House of Representatives, the general breakdown is as follows: Republicans are generally in favor, however, there is some push-back regarding how the money will be spent. Tea Partiers are not happy with the price tag. Democrats disagree with the methodology behind funding the bill, which involves royalties from oil drilling, and taxes on the Keystone pipeline.

The Senate bill, a scaled-back, shorter-term version of its House bill cousin proposes \$109 billion over two years going towards transportation projects. This bill has the support of President Obama, due to the fact that the House bill ties transportation dollars to domestic oil drilling, while the Senate bill does not.

This is a far cry from the White House's original proposal, where President Obama stated that he was in support of a six-year, \$556 billion bill to be spent on transportation projects nationwide. It was made clear from the beginning that neither the House of Representatives nor the Senate was interested in supporting a bill of that magnitude.

#### **V. Benefits of a long-term bill**

Regardless of the public opinion surrounding the House and Senate bills, both bills provide a glimmer of hope for the construction sector. Instead of the "band-aid" approach of offering a series of extensions, a long-term comprehensive bill will boost growth in industries that have been hit hardest by the recession.

Adding to the obvious benefits of putting construction workers' boots back on the ground, and improving our federal highway system, we will also see benefits of the reauthorization bill trickle back down into the U.S. economy. Manufacturers will benefit from a long-term bill; more machinery will need to be manufactured to meet the demand of an influx of infrastructure dollars going to transportation projects, providing a

much needed shot in the arm to an industry that has been forced to make cuts over the past few years. If properly invested in infrastructure, everyday commuters will see a positive effect on their wallets in terms of minimizing congestion around major U.S. cities. Conversely, if not invested properly, by the year 2040, motorists will be wasting \$175 billion annually by simply waiting in traffic.

In addition to boosting this economy, an increase in the quality of U.S. roadways translates into fewer traffic fatalities and vehicle maintenance and repair costs. About 33,000 automobile fatalities occur on a yearly basis, and poor road conditions are a factor in one-third of those 33,000 fatalities. As far as safety concerning this country's bridges, the situation is just as grave. Dozens of bridges have collapsed in the past forty years, killing hundreds. Additionally, up to one fourth of the bridges throughout the United States are rated as structurally deficient.

There is still a lot of work to be done on Capitol Hill before we see a long-term reauthorization bill signed into law, but lawmakers on all points of the political spectrum are beginning to understand that U.S. roads are not something that can be pushed to the back burner for much longer. Roads and bridges in this country are in dire need of repair, and unless Congress can agree, it would be a safe assumption that in this election year, U.S. lawmakers may see their careers crumble right along with the roads and bridges in their districts.

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