

## House Set to Vote on \$286.4B Highway Bill

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WASHINGTON

In its last act before leaving for its summer recess, the House is to approve what could be the biggest public works program of the decade, a \$286.4 billion highway and transit bill that will get construction projects moving and create jobs across the country.

"Jobs, jobs, jobs," House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., said Thursday in describing the legislation that the House is expected to take up and overwhelmingly pass late Thursday. He cited estimates that every \$1 billion spent on highways generates 48,000 jobs.

With passage of the six-year bill, lawmakers will be able to return home this week for the August recess with bragging rights about new roads, bridges, bus terminals or bike trails they have secured for their constituents.

The Senate also will vote on the measure before the end of the week, ending what has been a nearly two-year deadlock over legislation that everybody wanted but no one could agree on.

The 1998-2003 highway bill, funded at \$218 billion, expired in September 2003. Congress on Wednesday had to approve the 11th temporary extension of the old act to keep programs running until a new plan could be approved.

Slowing the legislative process was a White House veto threat over congressional ambitions to spend well over \$300 billion on the nation's infrastructure, as well as dissension among the states over the fair distribution of federal highway money.

The president has agreed to the \$286.4 billion price tag and has said he will sign the bill.

The final product, for the 2004-09 period, includes more than \$50 billion for transit projects and \$6 billion for safety programs. States will be guaranteed, by 2008, a return of at least 92 percent of their contributions to the federal Highway Trust Fund through gasoline taxes. Under current law, states are assured a 90.5 percent return on contributions.

The bill, said Sen. Jim Jeffords, I-Vt., who heads the minority on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, "will make our nation's roads and bridges safer and less congested and create thousands of jobs from coast to coast."

Stephen Sandherr, chief executive officer of the Associated General Contractors of America, praised congressional negotiators for coming up with the best possible bill during a time of tight federal budgets, but said more spending is needed to meet the nation's pressing infrastructure needs. "We're basically filling holes," he said.

Even before the final list of new projects was officially announced, lawmakers were lauding the benefits they would bring their constituents. Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., spoke of a new \$50 million fund to lessen congestion on Interstate 95 in his state, while Sen. Kit Bond, R-Mo., said he had secured \$50 million for Kansas City's Paseo Bridge.

The final bill is expected to contain thousands of such projects, which budget watchdogs condemn as "pork" but lawmakers say are essential to their communities.

In the last session of Congress, the House Transportation Committee sought as much as \$375 billion for the bill, citing the importance of fixing deteriorating highways and bridges that are blamed for thousands of fatal traffic accidents every year.

But with the federal budget deficit reaching record levels, the White House insisted on a far lower level, and threatened that the president would veto any bill that added to the deficit or increased taxes.

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On the Net:

Information on the bill, H.R. 3, can be found at <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

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