

Federal bill gives Vt. 40 percent more for transportation

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The Associated Press
MONTPELIER, Vt.

Vermont will get more than \$1 billion over five years for roads, bridges, rail enhancements, bike paths and safety improvements for kids' routes to school under a long-delayed federal transportation bill.

"This highway bill makes the biggest federal investment in Vermont's roads and bridges in history," said Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., the senior minority member on the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

"It will make Vermont's roads safer and less congested and bring new jobs and resources to our state for years to come," he added in a statement released by his office. "Every region of Vermont will benefit from this legislation."

The bill appeared certain to achieve House passage late Thursday, and then it will go to the Senate Friday. President Bush is expected to sign it.

Work on the legislation began three years ago. Last year it failed to pass because the Senate and White House were too far apart on spending. This year's compromise calls for \$286.4 billion in spending nationwide during the next five years.

Jeffords spokeswoman Diane Derby said Vermont will get an average of \$175 million a year for the next five years from the Federal Highway Administration, up from the average \$125 million a year it got in the previous transportation bill.

In addition, the bill includes several special appropriations directed at Vermont. They include \$100 million for highway, road and rail improvements for western Vermont; \$30 million toward repair of bridges in small towns; \$25 million for improvements to Vermont's interstate highways; and \$18 million to complete the Missisquoi Bay Bridge at the northern end of Lake Champlain.

A county-by-county breakdown of projects to be funded in Vermont was expected to be released on Friday.

"We've done well. The congressional staff did well down there," said John LaBarge, who works in policy and planning for the state Agency of Transportation.

Ken Connolly, minority staff director on the Environment and Public Works Committee, said Jeffords, who announced earlier this year he will retire at the end of next year, had spent much of his last term in the Senate fighting to preserve transportation funding for bike paths, sidewalks and other alternative transportation programs that had received their first substantial funding in the 1990s.

"Through the last three years of doing this, there were a lot of people attacking that ... framework" and insisting that federal transportation dollars be dedicated to highway building and maintenance, Connolly said.

Typical of Jeffords work was inclusion in the bill of the "Safe Routes to School" program, in which money will be set aside for communities to build bike paths and make safety improvements designed to make it easier and safer for children to get to school "under their own power," Connolly said.

Connolly said he had devoted about half his time for most of the last three years to the transportaion bill, working closely with Jeffords' staff member Jeff Squires, a former Vermont deputy secretary of transportation.

After Squires left for a consulting job in January, and work on the bill intensified, Connolly said the measure took up to 80 percent of his long days. He said he had been showering at the office and hadn't made it home for his three young children's 8:30 bedtime in more than a month.

"We were getting desparate for a bill after all this time. It was pretty tough for people who have families." Now, Connolly said, his plan was to return to Vermont for a month of relaxing and riding his bike "over those covered bridges we're going to protect."

July 28, 2005 04:13 PM EST

Associated Press