

Highway bill has \$1 billion for Vermont

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WASHINGTON -- Vermont would receive a record \$1 billion-plus in federal transportation money through 2009 under an agreement reached Thursday by Congress as part of the massive highway spending bill.

A vote by the House and Senate on the final bill was expected today.

The bill would boost the state's annual share of highway funding 40 percent from an average of \$125 million a year to \$175 million a year - a total increase of \$250 million through 2009.

The state also will receive more than \$200 million for special Vermont projects, thanks to the seniority status of Sen. Jim Jeffords, ranking member of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee.

"This highway bill makes the biggest federal investment in Vermont's roads and bridges in history," said Jeffords, I-Vt. "It will make Vermont's roads safer and less congested, and bring new jobs and resources to our state for years to come."

The bill is "good news for Vermont," said John LaBarge, special assistant to the Vermont Agency of Transportation secretary.

The legislation also includes \$30 million for the Vermont small town bridge fund, \$25 million for Vermont's interstate system, and \$5 million to preserve the state's historic covered bridges.

It also provides \$18 million to complete the Missisquoi Bay Bridge project that the entire Vermont congressional delegation had requested.

U.S. 7 in Charlotte will get \$4 million for paving, widening and other improvements aimed at making it safer and less congested.

It includes \$100 million to improve highway, road and rail transportation in western Vermont from Massachusetts to Quebec.

Improvements to rail tracks along the western side of the state should increase freight traffic and ease truck traffic along U.S. 7, LaBarge said. Plans also include adding passenger rail service along the corridor.

Although transportation spending is one of the few issues that draw broad bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, the measure had been stalled by disagreement over how much to spend and how to distribute money to the states. The last six-year program expired Oct. 1, 2003, and had to be extended 11 times.

The delays forced Vermont to postpone work on some projects, LaBarge said. The bill will let the state know how much money it can count on for the rest of the decade.

Jeffords is retiring in January 2007 and this is considered his last chance to steer a big infusion of federal money to Vermont. The winner in the November 2006 Senate race will come to Washington as a freshman senator lacking the seniority traditionally needed to get Vermont lots of highway money.

Rep. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., who is seeking Jeffords' seat, secured about \$13 million in transportation projects -- a respectable amount for a House member but far below the more than \$200 million Jeffords obtained.

Sanders' projects included: \$5.8 million for the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail, \$2.8 million for improvements to U.S. 4 and U.S. 7 in Rutland, \$960,000 for a bypass to route milk truck traffic away from downtown St. Albans, \$1.1 million for the Cross Vermont Trail, and \$868,412 for two interpretive centers at Smugglers Notch that will focus on the area's history and geography.

Free Press Staff Writer Terri Hallenbeck contributed to this report. Spending in Vermont Some of the highlights of the transportation spending plan agreed upon in Congress:

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\$25 million for Vermont's interstate system.

\$18 million to complete the Missisquoi Bay Bridge project.

\$5.8 million for the Lamoille Valley Rail Trail.

\$5 million to preserve the state's historic covered bridges.

\$4 million for paving and widening U.S. 7 in Charlotte.

\$960,000 for a bypass to route milk truck traffic away from downtown St. Albans.