

3. POLICY POSITION

REAUTHORIZATION OF THE FEDERAL TRANSPORTATION PROGRAM (SAFETEA-LU)

BACKGROUND

The reauthorization deadline for the current federal transportation program (SAFETEA-LU) is rapidly approaching (September 30, 2009) and already the different stakeholders, including Congressional members, officials at the U.S. Department of Transportation and state policymakers are discussing and debating the modalities of the proposed new legislation. Specifically, the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, chaired by Congressman James L. Oberstar, Minnesota, already has submitted its proposal (*The Surface Transportation Authorization Act of 2009: A Blueprint for Investment and Reform*) for review and discussion by the different stakeholders in this process. The fact that our national transportation system has a direct impact on the vitality and economic well-being of our country is indisputable. In addition, a vibrant transportation network provides for the seamless movement of the public as well as products, whether it is within a city, between different cities, between rural and urban areas or between the rest of the world and the United States.

Our nation's current transportation system is in urgent need of repair, renovation and restoration given the decades of underinvestment at every level of government. In the current economic downturn with states facing unprecedented budget shortfalls, many state transportation departments face tremendous backlogs of needed repairs and infrastructure improvements due to these budget constraints. Mounting fatalities and injuries as a result of vehicle crashes, crippling congestion in major cities and even small towns, soaring costs due to accidents and traffic delays, deteriorating highways and bridges, escalating capital and maintenance costs associated with public transit agencies, all add up to a panoply of enormous challenges straining every node in transportation system.

In the midst of these monumental logistical challenges, the forecast for the Highway Trust Fund (HTF), the primary source for federal funding of highway and transit systems, also remains extremely bleak. In 2008, the federal government was forced to transfer general fund monies to offset the negative balance in the HTF that emerged in order that essential highway and transit system programs in the states could continue as planned. It is expected that the federal government will have to make another transfer to the HTF in 2009. Nevertheless, despite this declining revenue trajectory, a significant increase in public funding will be necessary for America's transportation system to remain competitive.

In order for any future federal transportation program to be effective, solutions that are multi-modal in nature will be necessary. As demand for transportation grows and the population increases, congestion will continue to be a major factor affecting the efficient movement of people and goods. Potential solutions that address congestion will need to incorporate more than one mode of transportation. A multi-modal framework also will help to mitigate the environmental and public health concerns of our current transportation system.

RECOMMENDATION

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments expresses support for multimodal transportation solutions, preserving the federal-state transportation partnership and increasing intergovernmental collaboration. In addition, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments recognizes that transportation authorization funding must remain one of the nation's top priorities and should not be relegated to second-tier status, notwithstanding the range of other priorities currently being debated and discussed in Congress and within the administration.

The Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments recommends that Congress and the administration recognize the importance of transportation funding and give higher priority to this need by promptly enacting an authorization bill that is multi-modal, multi-year and adequately funded to meet the nation's continuing infrastructure needs; provides short-term funding stability and long-term vision; provides maximum flexibility to states; and considers the needs of both urban and rural areas.

In devising appropriate solutions to these enormous challenges, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments calls on both the executive and legislative branches within the federal government to secure and enhance the federal-state partnerships within the transportation system. In addition, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments calls on Congress and the Obama Administration to place the highest level of priority on the passage of new transportation authorization legislation.

Further, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments calls on all regions to join in focusing on the importance of federal transportation funding as set forth in this policy position as well as The Council of State Governments Resolutions adopted on May 31, 2008, in Lexington, Kentucky; December 6, 2008, in Omaha, Nebraska; and May 18, 2009, in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

Finally, the Southern Legislative Conference of The Council of State Governments requests that a copy of this policy position be forwarded to Southern state commissioners of transportation and to the Southern Congressional delegation.