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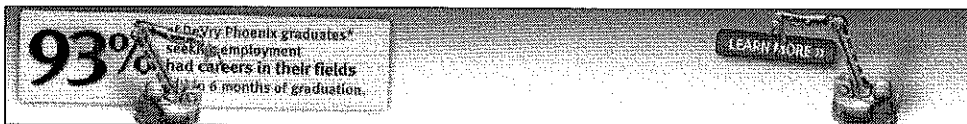
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TAXATION

Value-added tax, once taboo, is getting attention in Washington

By Lori Montgomery
4:07 PM PDT, May 27, 2009

Washington -- With budget deficits soaring and President Obama pushing a trillion-dollar-plus expansion of health coverage, some Washington policymakers are taking a fresh look at a money-making idea long considered politically taboo: a national sales tax.

Common around the world, including in Europe, such a tax -- called a value-added tax, or VAT -- has not been seriously considered in the United States. But advocates say few other options can generate the kind of money the nation will need to avert fiscal calamity.

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At a White House conference this year on the government's budget problems, a roomful of tax experts pleaded with Treasury Secretary Timothy F. Geithner to consider a VAT. A recent flurry of books and papers on the subject is attracting genuine, if furtive, interest in Congress. And last month, after wrestling with the White House over the massive deficits projected under Obama's policies, the chairman of the Senate Budget Committee declared that a VAT should be part of the debate.

"There is a growing awareness of the need for fundamental tax reform," Sen. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.) said. "I think a VAT and a high-end income tax have got to be on the table."

A VAT is a tax on the transfer of goods and services that ultimately is borne by the consumer. Highly visible, it would increase the cost of just about everything, including a carton of eggs and a visit with a lawyer. It is also hugely regressive, falling heavily on the poor. But VAT advocates say those negatives could be offset by using the proceeds to pay for healthcare for every American -- a tangible benefit that would be highly valuable to low-income families.

Liberals dispute that notion. "You could pay for it regressively and have people at the bottom come out better off -- maybe. Or you could pay for it progressively and they'd come out a lot better off," said Bob McIntyre, director of the nonprofit Citizens for Tax Justice, which has a health financing plan that targets corporations and the rich.

A White House official said a VAT was "unlikely to be in the mix" as a means to pay for healthcare reform. "While we do not want to rule any credible idea in or out as we discuss the way forward with Congress, the VAT tax, in particular, is popular with academics but highly controversial with policymakers," said Kenneth Baer, a spokesman for White House Budget Director Peter R. Orszag.

Still, Orszag has hired a prominent VAT advocate to advise him on healthcare: Ezekiel Emanuel, brother of White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and author of the 2008 book "Health Care, Guaranteed." Meanwhile, former Federal Reserve Chairman Paul A. Volcker, chairman of a task force Obama assigned to study the tax system, has expressed at least tentative support for a VAT.

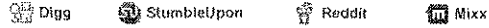
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"Everybody who understands our long-term budget problems understands we're going to need a new source of revenue, and a VAT is an obvious candidate," said Leonard Burman, co-director of the Tax Policy Center, a joint project of the Urban Institute and the Brookings Institution, who testified on Capitol Hill this month about his own VAT plan. "It's common to the rest of the world, and we don't have it."

Montgomery writes for the Washington Post.

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Expansive Road Bill Raises Issue Of Payment

By MICHAEL COOPER

It could wind up spending nearly 10 times as much money on transportation projects as the federal stimulus bill, but outside of Washington, where it has prompted a frenzy of politicking, it has attracted less than a 10th of the attention.

That measure, the federal transportation bill, could spend as much as \$450 billion on road and transit projects over the next six years, after the current law expires in September.

The most contentious question — how to pay for it all — took on a new urgency this week when officials announced that the source of most transportation money would run dry this summer for the second year in a row.

The bulk of the money in the federal Highway Trust Fund comes from the federal gasoline tax, as well as from a tax on truck sales. Lawmakers said they might be forced to bail out the fund in August with \$5 billion to \$7 billion from general tax revenues, just a year after they provided it with an \$8 billion bailout.

The trust fund is insolvent in large part because, for the second year in a row, Americans are driving less, and when they buy less gas, gasoline tax revenue declines. Last year the decline in purchases was attributed to record gas prices, and this year people are driving less because of the recession. At the same time, taxes collected from truck sales have fallen sharply, eroding another source of revenue.

While several business groups, transportation experts and lawmakers in both parties have called for raising the gasoline tax to meet transportation needs, the Obama administration has made it clear that it opposes raising the tax in a recession.

"The administration has inherited a system that can no longer pay for itself," Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood said Thursday at a hearing in the House, where he pledged to act this summer to address the expected shortfall. "We must think creatively as we search for sustainable funding mechanisms."

The federal gas tax is not a percentage of the amount of money spent, like a sales tax, but rather a flat 18.4-cent tax levied on each gallon of gasoline sold. It has not been raised since 1993, even as the price of gas has doubled. Officials also say inflation has eroded

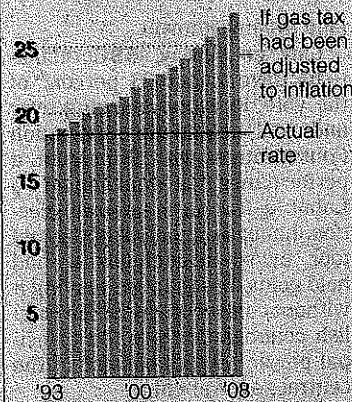
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Falling Behind

The purchasing power of the federal gas tax — last set in 1993 to 18.4 cents per gallon — has declined about 33 percent due to inflation.

Federal gas tax

30 cents per gallon



Source: National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission

THE NEW YORK TIMES

Expansive Road Bill Raises Issue of How to Pay for It

From Page A10

about a third of the tax's purchasing power since 1993.

Hopes that the tax issue will be resolved before the transportation law expires Sept. 30 dimmed this week when the House put off action on the bill until after its Fourth of July recess. That means Congress could be forced to bail out the trust fund this summer and then temporarily extend the transportation law, instead of passing a new measure that would put the program on firmer footing for the long haul.

But an aide to Representative James L. Oberstar, Democrat of Minnesota and chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee, said this week that Mr. Oberstar wanted a new transportation bill and would not support a temporary extension. As a pressure tactic, Mr. Oberstar is threatening to bring federally financed road work to a halt if a new bill is not passed.

Others in Congress have suggested that it is unlikely that a transportation bill can be adopted this summer. Both houses are focused on other priorities, including sweeping health care legislation. That would leave only a few weeks in September to get the transportation bill done, a narrow window for such a complex and expensive measure.

"They've got so many fish to fry that we're getting out in the back of the barbecue line," said Pete Ruane, president of the

David M. Herszenhorn contributed reporting from Washington.



JOE RAEDLE/GETTY IMAGES

Federal highway money creates projects like the one Guy Greenly worked on South Florida.

American Road & Transportation Builders Association, a major industry group, who nonetheless pronounced himself optimistic that a bill could be passed in time.

Mr. Ruane said it was vital for Congress to shore up the trust fund before it ran out of money this summer, to preserve construction jobs.

"If they delay on the short-term fix," he said, "they will have negated a large part of the stimulus package. These jobs could go away. When people don't see a long-term, consistent flow of revenue, they're not going to buy equipment, they're not going to

hire people."

Even as business groups and lawmakers in both parties have called for raising the gas tax, some fear that the move toward more fuel-efficient cars could make that only a temporary fix. A federal commission recently recommended raising the tax by 10 cents a gallon, but said that the nation should ultimately devise a way to tax people based on how many miles they drive, not on how much gasoline they use.

As the question of how to pay for transportation has taken on new urgency, the question of what kind of transportation to

pay for has not gone away. Transportation for America, a broad coalition of groups including environmentalists but also the National Association of Realtors and AARP, is calling for more spending on mass transit and rail, to reduce dependence on foreign oil, cut pollution and ease traffic.

Traditionally, spending on highways has outstripped spending on mass transit by roughly four to one. Some people were given hope that the ratio could be lowered when the Obama administration made sure that the stimulus bill included more money for faster rail service.

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Oberstar Says 57% Jump in Spending Needed for Roads and Transit Share | Email | Print | A A A

By Angela Greiling Keane

June 18 (Bloomberg) -- The U.S. should boost spending on highways and transit by more than half to \$450 billion the next six years to fix roads and ease congestion, the chairman of the House transportation committee said.

Minnesota Democrat James Oberstar told reporters yesterday he'll propose legislation for the boost from the current \$286.5 billion. Authority to spend from the highway trust fund for transportation maintenance and construction expires Sept. 30.

Oberstar said no decisions have been made on how to pay for the 57 percent jump, as fuel-saving cars and declines in driving reduce gasoline-tax revenue for the fund. His call for a six-year bill is at odds with a request yesterday from Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood. He asked lawmakers for an 18-month reauthorization to replenish the fund, saying it may run out of money in August.

"I don't see where the money's coming from yet," said Greg Cohen, chief executive officer of the American Highway Users Alliance, a Washington-based advocacy group. "That's the sticking point. And I think the administration sees that."

Cohen said while he supports Oberstar's six-year bill, an 18-month reauthorization would be preferable to letting the existing bill expire and the highway trust fund run dry.

"You can't ask the public to pay more for the current program, which isn't working," said Oberstar, who wants to give states more flexibility on how to spend federal money, restructure the Transportation Department and speed the approval process for transportation construction projects.

Oberstar will propose the legislation next week, said Jim Berard, a spokesman for the committee.

Usual Sources

Representative Peter DeFazio, chairman of the House highways and transit subcommittee, said the administration is reluctant to use the "usual sources" of funding, "which would be a gas tax." Other options being considered include bonds and tolls, said DeFazio, an Oregon Democrat.

LaHood said Congress probably won't pass a new law by late September, in which case the administration would have to ask for the extension when states have already started running out of money.

"The truth of the matter is that even if the House were to pass a bill by Sept. 30,

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there's no guarantee and highly unlikely that the Senate would," LaHood said in an interview. "So rather than stringing Congress along with three-month or six-month extensions, let's face reality."

A delay on a longer-term bill or an extension of the current law expiring in September would be "unacceptable," Oberstar told reporters yesterday in Washington.

Buying Time

Senator [Barbara Boxer](#), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, said yesterday that she's "very pleased" the administration is working to deal with the shortfall in highway funding.

"The White House proposal to replenish the trust fund until 2011 will keep the recovery and job creation moving forward and give us the necessary time to pass a more comprehensive multiyear transportation authorization bill with stable and reliable funding sources," Boxer said in a statement.

A delay in passing a new law would cost jobs in the construction industry, because states may be reluctant to put big projects up for bid without the promise of funding, DeFazio said.

To contact the reporter on this story: [Angela Greiling Keane](#) in Washington at agreilingkea@bloomberg.net

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The New York Times

June 18, 2009

Oberstar, Mica Plan \$500B, 6-Year Transportation Reauthorization

By JOSH VOORHEES, Greenwire

The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee wants \$500 billion over the next six years for the nation's roads, transit and high-speed rail, according to a blueprint of the bill that committee leadership hopes to pass before the current highway authorization expires at the end of September.

Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.) was scheduled to outline the proposal this morning at a press conference, but the release was postponed until 2 p.m. today to accommodate a series of House votes.

But a copy of the **17-page proposal** (pdf) shows that Oberstar and ranking member John Mica (R-Fla.) are calling for a \$337 billion investment in highway construction, \$100 billion for public transit and \$50 billion for President Obama's vision of a nationwide high-speed rail system. The remaining \$13 billion is for a variety of smaller initiatives.

The proposal is set to be released one day after Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood asked the committee to postpone its plans to overhaul the nation's transportation system by 18 months, and to instead extend the current authorization in an effort to prop up the cash-strapped Highway Trust Fund, which is set to run aground by August.

Oberstar's white paper, dated today, lays out the case against a temporary extension, something he has said he will attempt to block in an effort to force lawmakers to get down to the business of reauthorization.

"In the past, during these periods of multiple short-term extensions of the programs, state departments of transportation have slowed investment because of the uncertainty regarding the long-term future of the program, and been unwilling to invest in large, long-term projects until enactment of the reauthorization act," the blueprint says. "In this time of severe economic recession, the effects of any slowed investment could offset much of the benefits of the increased transportation investment provided under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act."

The \$500 billion bill is significantly more than the current \$286 billion authorization and the \$236 billion that the Highway Trust Fund revenues can afford, according to the blueprint. Still, the draft does not lay out how Congress will find the cash to pay for the spending -- something that has been a major concern among lawmakers, DOT officials and transportation trade groups.

The Oberstar-Mica proposal calls for a set of national transportation goals, including to improve metropolitan mobility, "lessen environmental impacts from the transportation network," and improve the sustainability and livability of communities.

The bill will also call for streamlining DOT, cutting more than 75 federal programs and consolidating highway funding under four core formula categories: critical asset investment, highway safety improvement, surface transportation, and congestion mitigation and air quality improvement, or CMAQ.

As part of its goal to expand mobility for goods and people, the proposal would establish a "metropolitan mobility and access" program to provide dedicated funding to help the nation's largest cities address congestion, a "projects of national significance" program to fund high-cost projects for goods and freight movement, and a "high-speed rail initiative." The programs would all be eligible for funding from a newly created "national infrastructure bank," which will "provide grants and credit assistance, including secured loans, loan guarantees, and standby lines of credit, as well as allocations of tax-exempt private activity bonding authority and tax-credit bonding authority."

The blueprint proposes creating an Office of Livability within DOT's Federal Highway Administration, to "establish a focal point within FHWA to advance environmentally sustainable modes of transportation, including transit walking, and bicycling."

The bill would require the transportation planning process to consider the greenhouse gas emissions from the sector. "The Environmental Protection Agency, in consultation with DOT, will establish national transportation-related greenhouse gas emissions reduction goals," the proposal states.

It would also create an undersecretary of intermodalism and an Office of Expedited Project Delivery to "improve the project delivery process by eliminating duplication in documentation and procedures and expedite the development of projects through the environmental review process, design, and construction."

Oberstar and Mica have vowed to pass a bill by the end of September. But with the reauthorization competing with sweeping climate legislation, health care reform, and a Supreme Court nomination for Congress' attention, the Obama administration and many lawmakers doubt the highway and transit bill could be signed into law anytime soon.

LaHood asked lawmakers yesterday to essentially extend the current spending bill for another 18 months in order to prevent the Highway Trust Fund from running dry. "Our No. 1 priority will be to work with all of you to plug the Highway Trust Fund, to find a way to do it and find a way to pay for it," LaHood told a Senate appropriations panel this morning.

LaHood originally called for the 18-month bill to come with some reform, but when pressed today by Sen. Patty Murray (D-Wash.), he granted that any major changes to the bill would be difficult, given the tight time frame lawmakers are working with. "I believe we can have discussions, whether we get to the point where we can include these as part of the fix of the the Highway Trust Fund? We'll have to see," he said.

Murray, who chairs the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee, doubted that even a short-term fix will be able to move in time, given everything on Congress' to-do list for the five weeks before it leaves for August recess.

"I'm very concerned that with the Highway Trust Fund being put into the mix of some policy discussions, it won't see the light of day," she said.

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Surface Transportation Authorization Act moves forward

Amendments are submitted to House Highway and Transit Subcommittee
June 24, 2009

The House Republicans are submitting their amendments of the Surface Transportation Authorization Act (STAA) to the Highway and Transit Subcommittee today. Below are some highlights:

Off-System Bridge Eligibility

Under current law, states must use 15% of their bridge funding for bridges that are not on the federal-aid highway system. This amendment will continue to allow states to be able to use 5% of the CAIP funds on off-system bridges. This would not be a requirement, just an eligible expense under the program (with a cap). Under the language in STAA, states cannot fund any projects off the federal-aid highway system with CAIP funds.

Transferability of Federal-Aid Highway Funds

States will be allowed to transfer funding between highway programs. STAA currently allows funding to be transferred to transit accounts, but does not allow transfers between highway accounts. In current law states can transfer up to 50% of funding in most highway programs to other highway programs. This amendment restores the transferability that exists in current law.

Equitable Distribution of Funding Under the Projects of National Significance Program

This amendment adds geographic distribution and an appropriate balance of urban and rural projects to the selection criteria that the secretary uses to select projects that will be funded through the Projects of National Significance Program. This mirrors the language for selecting projects for the discretionary surface transportation grants in the economic stimulus bill.

Flexibility in Funding

Under current law, projects with an estimated cost of \$500 million or more must submit a project management plan and an annual financial plan and projects with an estimated cost of \$100 million or more only need to submit an annual financial plan. The amendment would change the threshold for these requirements to be \$1 billion and \$500 million, respectively.

Increasing Truck Weight for Sixth Axle

The amendment authorizes a state to allow by state statute a vehicle to exceed the maximum gross weight of 80,000 lb currently allowed on the interstate system routes within the state if the vehicle has six axles, meets axle weight requirements and does not exceed 97,000 lb. It allows a state to exceed the maximum axle weight requirements by no more than 2,000 lb. The amendment authorizes the U.S. DOT Secretary to terminate the operation of vehicles on a specific route if the operation poses an unreasonable risk to safety.

Source: Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure Republicans June 24, 2009

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