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October 9, 2007

Restoring Regional Equity to the Federal Highway Trust Fund

by Ronald D. Utt, Ph.D.
Backgrounder #2074

Among the many flaws in the federal highway and transit program are the pervasive regional inequities in the way that federal highway spending is distributed among the 50 states, the District of Columbia, and five territories.[1] Under current law, motorists and truck owners pay a federal fuel tax--18.3 cents per gallon on gasoline and 21 cents per gallon on diesel fuel--into the highway trust fund, which returns these fuel tax revenues to the states for their highway and transit projects.

In fiscal year (FY) 2005, \$32.9 billion in user fees and taxes was collected for the highway component of the trust fund, and a total of \$37.6 billion was returned to the states and territories according to a statutory formula that determines how much each state receives.[2] However, as annual U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) data reveal, many states were shortchanged, while others--notably Alaska and the District of Columbia--received far more in return than they put into the trust fund.

As Congress and the President begin to develop legislative proposals to reauthorize the federal highway program, which will expire in 2009, ending these regional inequities should be a high priority.

More Losers Than Winners

While trust fund revenues reflect actual tax payments made by motorists in each state, spending allocations to the states from the trust fund are determined by a mathematical formula that attempts to measure "need" based on several quantitative measures (e.g., miles of road and number of licensed drivers). In fact, the system embodies a number of inexplicable inequities that transfer billions of dollars from states in the South and the Midwest to the Northeast, the Mountain West, and Alaska.

Table 1 presents USDOT data on the extent to which each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia has gained or lost

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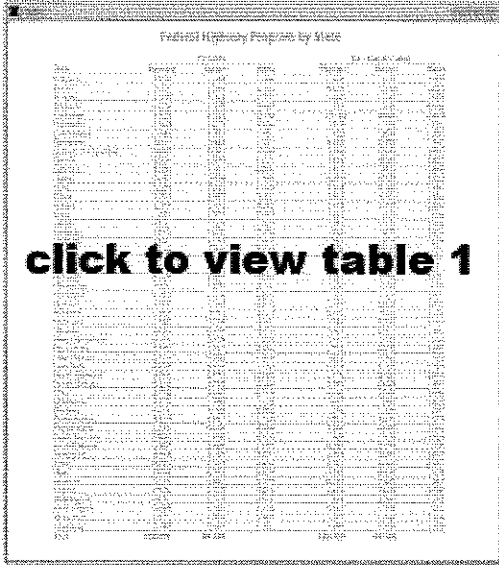
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from the federal program by comparing their share of the tax revenues paid into the trust fund to the share they receive of trust fund spending.[3] The first three columns provide equity information for FY 2005, the most recent year available, while the second set of three columns provides equity information for all program spending since the program's inception in 1956.



click to view table 1

Specifically, the first column in each set is the share of the tax revenues that the motorists in each state paid into the trust fund in 2005, while the second column is the share each state received in trust fund spending that year. Column three provides a ratio of the two (return divided by payments). Any state scoring less than 1.0 is a loser (paying in more than it gets back), while any state scoring over 1.0 is a "winner" because motorists in other states are subsidizing its road building.

For example, South Carolina was one of the biggest losers in 2005 because its motorists provided the trust fund with 1.836 percent of its revenues while receiving only 1.535 percent of spending in return. In effect, South Carolina received only an 83.6 percent payback on its investment share. South Carolina is also one of the biggest losers over the 50-year history of the program. Only Texas and Oklahoma have done worse since the program's inception.

Table 2 ranks the seven biggest all-time losers in the federal highway program. With the exception of Oklahoma, the poor performance of loser states continued into 2005. (See Table 1.) For every loser providing a subsidy to other states, there are almost as many winners receiving these subsidies.

Biggest Losers in Federal Highway Program, 1956–2005

State	Return Ratio
South Carolina	0.000
Michigan	0.001
Georgia	0.040
Ohio	0.042
Florida	0.050

click to view table 2

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics 2005, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohyp/hist/hist05/index.cfm (September 19, 2007).

Table 3 lists the top seven winners in the federal highway trust fund misallocations. Over the past 50 years, the motorists in Alaska have received six times as much from the federal highway trust fund as they have paid into it. Table 1 also shows that these highway trust fund misallocations are exceptionally regressive. For example, the less wealthy Southern states are subsidizing the much more prosperous Northern states. Emblematic of this peculiar federal policy is the fact that motorists in Mississippi (0.893 trust fund return ratio), the poorest state in the union, are subsidizing motorists in Connecticut (1.451 return ratio), the richest state.

Biggest Winners in Federal Highway Program, 1956–2005

State	Return Ratio
Alaska	4.011
Hawaii	2.857
Montana	2.136
Rhode Island	2.004
South Dakota	1.905
North Dakota	1.877

click to view table 3

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics 2005, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohyp/hist/hist05/index.cfm (September 19, 2007).

In dollars and cents, the inequity can be quite costly to the states on the losing end of the flawed allocation system. Table 4 offers a few examples drawn from the 30 donor states in 2005 to illustrate how much less these states received in federal highway spending because of the flaws in the federal highway allocation formula. The return share deficiency is the difference between the payment percentage and the return percentage in Table 1.

Against these examples of losers--except for Minnesota, all of them have been losers since the program's inception in 1956--

are 21 winners in 2005. Table 5 provides examples of several states that received the extra money in 2005 because of the inequities in the system.

Not surprisingly, given all of the publicity about the infamous "Bridges to Nowhere," Alaska is in a class by itself in terms of receiving excess benefits from the highway trust fund. In FY 2005, its motorists paid only \$66.3 million in fuel taxes into the trust fund but received a staggering \$490.4 million in trust fund spending, thereby earning the distinction of achieving the most egregious inequity in the system.

One other troubling observation from Table 4 and Table 5 is that the current system effectively transferred \$559 million from motorists in Texas (median income of \$41,645 in 2004) to motorists in Connecticut (median income of \$56,617) and Alaska (median income \$52,141).

Selected Donor State Losses, FY 2005

State	Return Share Deficiency (percentage points)	FY 2005 Loss
South Carolina	-0.101	-\$112,743,000
Minnesota	-0.430	-\$161,798,000
Georgia	-0.415	-\$163,480,000
Indiana	-0.515	-\$193,372,000

click to view table 4

Source: Heritage Foundation calculations and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway Incomes (HIS) Data FY-2005, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/returnshare/050901.pdf (September 14, 2007).

Selected Donee State Gains, FY 2005

State	Return Share Excess (percentage points)	Gain
Alaska	1.070	\$490,400,000
Connecticut	0.526	\$199,097,000
Pennsylvania	0.641	\$240,894,000
Hawaii	0.309	\$120,544,000
West Virginia	0.504	\$189,400,000

click to view table 5

Source: Heritage Foundation calculations and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway Incomes (HIS) Data FY-2005, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/returnshare/050901.pdf (September 14, 2007).

Another perverse consequence of the donor- donee misallocation is that most states on the losing end are experiencing above-average population growth rates and thus have a greater need to build new roads because of the increasing numbers of motorists. By contrast, winner states are

generally experiencing below-average population growth and thus need fewer new roads.

Between 2000 and 2006, the U.S. population grew 6.3 percent, while among donor states, Texas's population increased by 12.9 percent, South Carolina experienced a 7.7 percent increase, and Georgia's population increased by 14.4 percent.

Among the winning donee states, Connecticut's population increased by just 2.9 percent between 2000 and 2006, New York experienced a 2.1 percent increase, Pennsylvania's population increased by 1.3 percent, and West Virginia's population increased by only 0.5 percent.

In Alaska--the biggest winner of all--the population increased by 7.0 percent--just slightly higher than the national rate--but its extremely small population (670,053 in 2006) meant that its FY 2005 windfall of \$412 million helped to accommodate the road needs of just 43,121 new Alaskans.

In contrast, the 2.6 million new Texans had to make due with a \$559 million deficiency in their share of the highway trust fund.

The Dos and Don'ts of Fixing These Inequities

As the last three columns of Table 1 illustrate, the state-by-state inequities have been a long-standing problem.

A Pattern of Failure. Periodically, the donor states have attempted to organize in an effort to correct the problem. Perhaps the most notable effort was in 1996-1998, when Congress developed and ultimately enacted the 1998 highway reauthorization bill, known as the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21).^[4]

In advance of the 1998 reauthorization, more than 20 states--many in the South and West--organized themselves into a coalition called STEP 21 and lobbied for a fairer system. In response, Congress made what can best be described as "important cosmetic changes" in the bill. As the FY 2005 data in Tables 1, 2, and 4 reveal, these changes largely failed to impose any semblance of equity. Most donor states remained donors and to much the same degree.

In the years preceding enactment of the 2005 reauthorization bill--the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU)--a similar though less well-organized coalition was formed, but it accomplished little, and the final bill did not reduce the inequities among the states.

Efforts to work within the system by modifying the existing program have accomplished little despite well-organized campaigns to change the law. In large part this is due to resistance from Members of Congress representing "winner" states, which are predictably reluctant to surrender their advantage. To date, these states have been quite successful in maintaining the status quo and their benefits from it.

Turnback. As an alternative to the failed work-within-the-system approach, some Members have proposed ending the federal highway program and "turning back" to the states the responsibility and right to collect the 18.3 cents per gallon federal fuel tax.

The interstate highway system was completed in the early 1980s, fulfilling the original goals of the highway program. Since then, the program has become a vast spoils system, of which Alaska's Bridges to Nowhere are only one of more than 7,000 earmarks enacted in 2005. Indeed, as a result of the poorly conceived 2005 reauthorization, only about 60 percent of the federal fuel taxes paid by hapless motorists will go to roads.[5]

Legislation to turn back the federal highway program to the states was first introduced by Senator Connie Mack (R-FL) and Representative John Kasich (R-OH) in 1996 during the congressional debate leading up to TEA-21.[6] In the years since then, several other members of the House and Senate have introduced variations of this bill. Yet none of them went very far because the shortchanged states' congressional delegations and state government officials have been reluctant to push the legislation.

Opting Out. Given that Congress might be reluctant to abandon a federal program that provides so many earmarking opportunities, an alternative might be to keep the program in its current form but allow individual states to opt out of it and replace the federal fuel tax with their own levies. In return, opt-out states would agree to meet certain performance standards, including maintaining and enhancing segments of interstate highway in their states. Beyond that, opt-out states would be free to pursue transportation objectives in the best interest of their citizens, while states that chose to stay in the program would continue to benefit from the guidance of the USDOT and Congress.[7]

Conclusion

Although SAFETEA-LU does not expire until September 2009, interested trade associations and lobbyists representing tax-using enterprises and institutions are pushing Members of Congress to adopt new schemes to raise taxes and tolls on motorists to fund their privileged and influential constituencies. In these circumstances, there is an opportunity for some Members of Congress to step forward on behalf of beleaguered tax-paying motorists and introduce legislation that will redirect the motorists' taxes to projects that enhance mobility and promote economic prosperity.

Ronald D. Utt, Ph.D., is Herbert and Joyce Morgan Senior Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.

[1] American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Marianas, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands.

[2]Although the highway program attempts to match spending with anticipated revenues, the 2005 \$4.7 billion gap between trust fund revenues and spending was a consequence of revenues falling short of earlier projections and higher spending plans. The 2005 reauthorization of the highway program deliberately set spending levels higher than expected revenues with the expectation of drawing down the balances in the trust fund. Some projections suggest that the trust fund will be depleted by FY 2008. These revenue and spending data exclude transactions with the mass transit account within the highway trust fund and some other excise taxes.

[3]Data from U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, Table FE-221, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/pdf/fe221.pdf (September 19, 2007).

[4]Public Law 105-178.

[5]For information on the extent to which federal fuel tax funds are diverted to other purposes, see Wendell Cox, Alan Pisarski, and Ronald D. Utt, *21st Century Highways: Innovative Solutions to America's Transportation Needs* (Washington, D.C.: The Heritage Foundation, 2005), p. 170.

[6]Transportation Empowerment Act, H.R. 3840 and S. 1971, 104th Cong., 2nd Sess.

[7]Cox, Pisarski, and Utt, *21st Century Highways*, pp. 163-182.

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Federal Highway Program by State

State	FY 2005			FY 1956-FY 2005		
	Payment	Return	Ratio	Payment	Return	Ratio
Alabama	1.859	1.944	1.046	1.978	1.977	0.999
Alaska	0.201	1.299	6.446	0.205	1.233	6.011
Arizona	2.058	1.713	0.832	1.640	1.566	0.955
Arkansas	1.276	1.259	0.987	1.323	1.239	0.936
California	9.538	9.523	0.998	10.188	8.948	0.878
Colorado	1.468	1.271	0.866	1.319	1.394	1.057
Connecticut	0.945	1.371	1.451	1.105	1.679	1.520
Delaware	0.261	0.442	1.691	0.283	0.409	1.442
District of Columbia	0.090	0.391	4.328	0.146	0.542	3.710
Florida	5.504	6.995	1.271	4.809	4.088	0.850
Georgia	3.786	3.351	0.885	3.512	2.952	0.840
Hawaii	0.247	0.456	1.848	0.253	0.723	2.857
Idaho	0.529	0.725	1.372	0.516	0.765	1.481
Illinois	3.703	2.987	0.807	3.855	3.706	0.961
Indiana	2.747	2.232	0.812	2.673	2.157	0.807
Iowa	1.233	1.077	0.873	1.269	1.279	1.008
Kansas	1.031	1.059	1.027	1.181	1.176	0.996
Kentucky	1.895	1.660	0.876	1.789	1.670	0.934
Louisiana	1.691	1.547	0.915	1.781	1.814	1.019
Maine	0.510	0.495	0.970	0.536	0.536	1.001
Maryland	1.790	1.565	0.875	1.756	2.028	1.155
Massachusetts	1.763	1.690	0.959	1.929	2.539	1.316
Michigan	3.209	2.834	0.883	3.561	2.959	0.831
Minnesota	1.801	1.370	0.761	1.636	1.750	1.070
Mississippi	1.363	1.218	0.893	1.305	1.184	0.907
Missouri	2.489	2.266	0.910	2.559	2.230	0.871
Montana	0.449	0.953	2.123	0.470	1.003	2.136
Nebraska	0.780	0.734	0.941	0.794	0.792	0.997
Nevada	0.825	0.674	0.818	0.607	0.711	1.171
New Hampshire	0.444	0.459	1.033	0.417	0.487	1.168
New Jersey	2.940	2.457	0.836	2.905	2.592	0.892
New Mexico	0.916	0.932	1.018	0.832	0.960	1.153
New York	3.959	4.611	1.165	4.576	5.188	1.134
North Carolina	3.092	2.777	0.898	2.976	2.429	0.816
North Dakota	0.312	0.706	2.264	0.347	0.658	1.897
Ohio	3.970	3.650	0.919	4.165	3.509	0.842
Oklahoma	1.372	1.540	1.122	1.683	1.385	0.823
Oregon	1.216	1.165	0.958	1.276	1.336	1.047
Pennsylvania	3.910	4.551	1.164	4.306	4.641	1.078
Rhode Island	0.233	0.544	2.338	0.294	0.608	2.066
South Carolina	1.836	1.535	0.836	1.669	1.378	0.826
South Dakota	0.357	0.689	1.930	0.367	0.699	1.905
Tennessee	2.443	2.127	0.871	2.385	2.097	0.879
Texas	9.025	7.537	0.835	8.121	6.468	0.797
Utah	0.855	0.751	0.877	0.766	0.937	1.225
Vermont	0.225	0.452	2.003	0.247	0.465	1.881
Virginia	2.936	2.507	0.854	2.679	2.625	0.980
Washington	1.871	1.713	0.916	1.848	2.246	1.216
West Virginia	0.688	1.192	1.734	0.767	1.344	1.752
Wisconsin	1.871	1.858	0.993	1.947	1.744	0.896
Wyoming	0.489	0.681	1.391	0.449	0.706	1.573
Total	100.000	99.533		100.000	99.546	

Source: Heritage Foundation calculations and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, Table FE-221, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/pdf/fe221.pdf (September 19, 2007).

Biggest Losers in Federal Highway Program, 1956–2005

State	Return Ratio
Texas	0.797
Oklahoma	0.823
South Carolina	0.826
Michigan	0.831
Georgia	0.840
Ohio	0.842
Florida	0.850

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/index.htm (September 19, 2007).

Biggest Winners in Federal Highway Program, 1956–2005

<u>State</u>	<u>Return Ratio</u>
Alaska	6.011
District of Columbia	3.710
Hawaii	2.857
Montana	2.136
Rhode Island	2.066
South Dakota	1.905
North Dakota	1.897

Source: U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/index.htm (September 19, 2007).

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Source: Heritage Foundation calculations and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, Table FE-221, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/pdf/fe221.pdf (September 19, 2007).

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Connecticut	0.426	\$160,095,000
New York	0.652	\$245,028,000
Pennsylvania	0.641	\$240,894,000
Hawaii	0.209	\$78,544,000
West Virginia	0.504	\$189,408,000

Source: Heritage Foundation calculations and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *Highway Statistics 2005*, Table FE-221, at www.fhwa.dot.gov/policy/ohim/hs05/pdf/fe221.pdf (September 19, 2007).

The Roanoke Times

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Wednesday, April 16, 2008

A way to break the transportation impasse

Ray D. Pethtel

Pethtel was the chairman of the Commonwealth Transportation Board and commissioner of the Department of Transportation from 1986 to 1990.

The Republican-led House of Delegates and the Democratic-led Senate have been at odds for several years about raising new transportation revenue. The House adamantly refuses to raise the gas tax. The Senate wants statewide impact. The General Assembly passed House Bill 3202 as an apparent compromise.

This spring, part of the legislation was repealed (abusive driver fees) and another part was declared unconstitutional (local tax authority given to an unelected body). The opposing positions seem intractable. The gas tax impasse rests on at least three points:

1. The last tax increase in 1986 put the gas tax at 17.5 cents per gallon. Today, 22 years later, considering inflation, that amount has the purchasing power of just 8 cents. As costs increased over the years, the purchasing power to construct, maintain and operate transportation facilities decreased.
2. The Senate wants a statewide bill; the House is more focused on regional revenue for the urban areas of Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads.
3. The House does not want to raise any taxes; the Senate is advocating a gas tax increase.

As luck would have it, there may be a way to address all three goals using existing law as the basis (or as the "vehicle" as legislators would put it) for compromise. Section 58.1-1720 of the Code of Virginia permits any jurisdiction or group of jurisdictions to create a transportation district.

If the district is adjacent to the Northern Virginia Transportation District, it can levy a 2 percent tax on the retail price of gas. To implement a statewide district, assuming local governments don't do it on their own, would likely require relatively simple legislative action by amending the existing law.

The General Assembly would need to create a statewide transportation district with optional or mandatory participation for localities. The statewide district would be governed by local elected officials. Each local government would be required to vote to become a member, satisfying the constitutional requirement.

The new statewide district would have authority to impose a 2 percent tax, again under existing law. In order to gain voluntary participation, legislation should allocate the funds to the regional entities of Northern Virginia, Richmond and Hampton Roads according to the amount collected in those areas. The district then could allocate the remaining funds through the statewide formulas to those jurisdictions that participate.

Since the tax is based on a percentage of the retail sales price of gas, the revenue would be sensitive to inflation. And there is an existing mechanism to collect retail taxes -- so administration would not be costly.

As long as the district has continuous statewide connections and is adjacent to the Northern Virginia District, even if it looks like Swiss cheese, it could impose the tax.

Virginia sells more than 11 billion gallons of gas each year. With a pump price at \$3 a gallon, a 2 percent sales tax could raise more than \$660 million. If the legislation allowed the district to set the tax up to 3 percent, it could easily reach the \$1 billion mark.

Is this a solution the General Assembly can live with? As with the previous law, the General Assembly would continue to shift more of the transportation revenue responsibility to the local level. The transportation tax would keep pace with inflation, and it would have statewide impact with regional focus. Such legislation is straightforward and meets each of the conditions the General Assembly and the governor are looking for.

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BACON'S REBELLION

The Op/Ed Page for Virginia's New Economy

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Doug Koelemay



There's a Hole in the Bucket

It's called road maintenance, and it's draining the Transportation Trust Fund of revenue for new construction.

Well into its sixth straight year of trying half-measures and cost-shifting ideas for transportation funding, the Virginia General Assembly appears to be readying itself to do something more than sing about the hole in the bucket. The action would have to come in a special legislative session sometime in the months ahead. Without action the FY2009-2014 Six-Year Improvement Plan (SYIP) will require a cumulative \$1.4 billion to be moved from construction into highway maintenance.

Most of us are familiar with the circular argument in the old song between Henry and Liza that begins and ends with "There's a hole in the bucket." Henry is all about stating the problem. Liza is always ready with the incremental solution. Liza's suggestions, stanza by stanza, respond to Henry's questions -- to fix it, dear Henry, with straw that he should cut with the hatchet that he's sharpened on the stone he has wetted with water he has carried in the bucket.

"There's a hole in the bucket, dear Liza, a hole," Henry laments as he ends up at the point where he started. The song endures because there are fewer things cuter than the singing back and forth between boys and girls. But what we applaud in children wears thin when proffered by adults as transportation policy.

The hole is in Virginia's transportation maintenance budget. It started innocently enough as revenues dedicated to the Highway Maintenance and Operations Fund began to grow more slowly than maintenance needs. The initial diversion of construction funds from the Transportation Trust Fund was fairly discrete. Since FY2003, however, the costs of ordinary maintenance of ditches, potholes and equipment, rehabilitation and reconstruction of bridges, guardrails and drainage pipe, and daily operations and incident management have grown by double digits each year.

The Virginia Department of Transportation estimates, for example, that the average cost per lane-mile of a one-and-one-half inch of asphalt overlay has jumped 85 percent in

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the last five years. Seven of Virginia's nine transportation districts now spend more on maintenance than construction. Actual spending for maintenance in the current fiscal year (\$1.26 billion) virtually equals spending for construction (\$1.36 billion). And maintenance and operations costs are projected to grow at four percent a year, even in a less-than-booming economy.

As is the case with Henry, some members of the General Assembly have been content to move unimaginatively from one question to the next. One can see the hole, but do we really need water? Why is there a hole in the bucket? Was the bucket poorly made? Did past users of the bucket cause the damage? Should bucket users pay a special fee? What if we encourage users to explore other water-carrying options? Perhaps the improvement of the overall economy will prompt the bucket to fix itself.

In 2007 the General Assembly did include in its transportation funding package some new revenue sources for the Highway Maintenance and Operations Fund, including the so-called abuser fees for habitually bad drivers and taxes on auto insurance premiums. But with abuser fees now repealed, half of the hole still needs to be fixed. And until the hole in the maintenance budget is fixed, new revenues to be generated by regional plans in Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads will end up substituting for, not complementing, state revenues.

In special session later this year, the Assembly will have the opportunity to put revenues for bridge repair, road construction and more robust system operations on solid footing by approving new revenues that not only fill the hole but grow as maintenance needs grow. The Virginia's delegates and senators can return the Henry-Liza "hole in the bucket" song to the elementary schools where it belongs.

-- April 21, 2008

Where Clinton, Obama are on transit

By CATHERINE LUCEY
Philadelphia Daily News

luceyc@phillynews.com 215-854-4172 Barack Obama INFRASTRUCTURE:

FOR MORE THAN a year, the Democratic presidential candidates have traveled around the country by bus, train and plane to meet voters.

Although transit infrastructure is critical to their politicking, U.S. Sens. Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama rarely speak about it on the stump.

"Transportation, which affects virtually everyone in the country, is barely on the radar of any of the candidates," said Samuel I. Schwartz, of Sam Schwartz PLLC, a transportation-planning firm.

In Philadelphia, the need for greater transportation investment is clear. Just last month, part of Interstate 95 was shut down for days due to a crack in a concrete support pillar. And SEPTA's bus, subway and regional-rail network consistently suffers from a lack of money.

James RePass, president of National Corridors Initiative, a bipartisan transportation-advocacy group, noted that cities often are hit hard by a lack of focus on transportation.

"We have not renewed our infrastructure [in cities] because we built it many, many years ago," he said. "Americans are good at cutting ribbons for new highways. They are not very good at cutting ribbons for maintenance contracts."

Clinton and Obama have infrastructure plans that outline more funding for roads, bridges and Amtrak trains. Schwartz said that he was glad to see pledges for Amtrak but that, overall, the candidates' proposals are very similar.

"There's nothing that separates either of them terrifically," he said. But, he did note, "their advisers are very good."

Allison L. C. de Cerreno, director of the Wagner Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, at New York University, said she's been disappointed in the discussion so far.

Although more infrastructure money is badly needed, C. de Cerreno said just throwing money at the existing systems isn't enough.

"What we need from the federal level is not just the same-old, same-old," she said. "Really, the vision of this is what we need."

In January, the Wagner Rudin Center at NYU held a presidential forum on transportation issues, hosted by Schwartz. Both candidates sent surrogates.

Experts said that the candidates should be talking more about the nation's overall transportation system - roads, trains, air and water - and pondering how best to invest in the future. They stressed a need for more high-speed rail, which is the most energy efficient way to move people and goods.

"We need a recognition that America is in a transportation crisis," said RePass. "We are losing our ability to compete in world markets as we allow our infrastructure to deteriorate."

RePass and C. de Cerreno pointed to Asia and Europe as areas investing in infrastructure.

"In Europe, they're actually planning high-speed rail on a scale that's continental," said C. de Cerreno.

Here's how Obama and Clinton plan to address the nation's transportation needs:

Will create a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank to receive \$6 billion annually to finance transportation projects around the country.

LOCAL TRANSIT: Will double the Jobs Access and Reverse Commute program, which provides federal money to help low-income people get to work. Will increase resources for local public transportation, but doesn't provide a dollar amount.

AMTRAK AND HIGH-SPEED RAIL: Will continue to fight for more funding. Supported a bill to provide \$11 billion over six years. Supports development of high-speed freight and passenger rail, but does not indicate how much money he would provide.

AIR AND SEA: Wants to modernize air-traffic-control system to reduce delays. Will develop an accurate terrorist watch list to improve safety of air travel.

Hillary Clinton

INFRASTRUCTURE:

Will establish a \$10 billion emergency fund for repairs to roads, bridges and seaports. Another \$250 million will fund "Emergency Assessment Grants" to help states inspect infrastructure.

LOCAL TRANSIT: Will provide \$1.5 billion in additional funding annually for public transit.

AMTRAK AND HIGH-SPEED RAIL: Will increase funding for "inter-city" rail systems by \$1 billion over five years. Also plans to invest more in Amtrak.

AIR AND SEA: Would devise a national policy to expand port capacity. *

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