



Congress has plenty on transportation plate after summer's heated budget debates

Still reeling from the heated budget debates of summer, Congress has returned to Washington and quickly set to work on a number of pressing pieces of transportation legislation.

First up: another extension of the FAA Reauthorization. The extension passed on August 5 bought Congress some time and ended the FAA's partial shutdown, but the short-term extension is due to expire on September 16. Without passing another extension (which would be the 22nd consecutive short-term extension), 4,000 FAA employees may once again find themselves furloughed. During a September 8 hearing, House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman John Mica indicated that there would be another short-term extension.

The next piece of transportation legislation set to expire is the surface transportation authorization on September 30. On September 8 the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee held a markup of the Surface Transportation Extension Act of 2012, which would extend current funding levels through January 31, 2012. The Committee unanimously approved the extension, sending it to the Senate floor.

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On the House side, simply extending the current legislation as-is will be prohibited due to the House-passed FY 2012 Budget Resolution. And, despite Chairman Mica's stated intentions to have a new authorization bill completed before the current extension expires, he indicated in an August 31 press release that he had accepted the inevitability of another extension, saying, “I will agree to one additional highway program extension, this being the eighth of the overdue transportation reauthorization.” He has not yet indicated specifics of said extension.

Once an extension has been signed into law, both chambers can resume work on their respective surface transportation authorization bills. While the House has been quiet on

progress made to their proposal, working titled “A New Direction,” Senate EPW Chairman Barbara Boxer indicated progress has been made in securing the necessary funding for the EPW's proposed “MAP-21.”

The nation's eye remains focused on the newly-formed Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction, commonly known as the “Super Committee.” The bipartisan group of 12 has been tasked with identifying at least \$1.2 trillion in savings over a ten-year period by November 23. As the Committee rolls up its sleeves, some members believe they have been charged with more than just finding ways to cut spending. Committee Member Senator John Kerry stated in a press release, “We are here to examine the numbers, but we're also here to examine our consciences and look beyond narrow considerations of party or ideology to address the broader needs of our nation...We must restore confidence and we need to do it in a hurry.”

At the time of publication there has been no strong indication of the Committee's proposed cuts, but many in Washington speculate that the pinch will affect virtually all public funding.

Transportation investment received a great deal of focus during President Obama's September 8 jobs speech to Congress. The President touted his American Jobs Act, explaining that its contents lay out a plan to put unemployed and underemployed Americans to work, jumpstarting “thousands of transportation projects all across the country.” During his speech, the President also gave emphasis to the correlation between America's ability to move people and goods, and its global economic competitiveness. That correlation, as the President pointed out, has not been lost on countries like China and India that have been aggressively investing in transportation. President Obama repeatedly appealed to his Congressional audience, “Pass this bill.”

Congress will now review the President's proposal to find bipartisan ground, and hopefully, end the “political circus” President Obama referenced in his speech.

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