

CONGRESS: Road forward seen for transpor

As federal transportation funding is set to expire, a new piece of legislation is being hammered out to pay for projects

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PM

WASHINGTON — With the federal legislation that funds road, bridge and rail p to expire in March, congressional leaders are preparing to launch an all-out pu protect jobs and guide the nation's transportation policy for years.

The bill has enormous implications for Inland area highway and transit projects local officials said, especially if federal officials embrace goods movement as a opening the funding faucet for many long-sought Southern California projects.

Significant obstacles stand in the way of passage, most notably differences be won approval in a key Senate panel and a still-emerging plan in the House Tra year when election politics are expected to stifle the chances for major legislat hope for a new transportation bill.

“It’s by no means certain, but I think both sides — both Republicans and Democrats — will find an impasse on a bill that is very popularly labeled as a jobs bill,” said Ken Orski, a columnist who worked under the Nixon and Ford administrations who publishes a newsletter on the subject.

Leading the charge in the Senate is Barbara Boxer, chairwoman of the Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation. In November, the panel, which oversees transportation, approved a two-year extension with bipartisan support, sending it to the full Senate for consideration.

Throughout the January recess, Boxer, D-Calif., has held regular strategy conferences in her San Francisco County home, connecting with lawmakers, congressional staffers and an array of interest groups supporting the bill. Those groups, as many as 50, range across the political spectrum from conservative business groups to the AFL-CIO. The organizations are preparing to issue an open letter to Congress to urge passage of the bill, Boxer said.

Boxer’s backing from groups typically at odds on many issues underscores both the importance of the bill and the election year when most big-ticket items have little chance of passage in Congress before the transportation bill expires on March 31.

A short-term extension of the current bill is possible if lawmakers cannot reach a deal. Stopgap measures have grown increasingly unpopular, both among voters and lawmakers.

“If we don’t act — if we allow this thing to lapse — we’re talking about threatening jobs,” Boxer said.

An estimated 1.8 million jobs around the nation depend on the funding currently provided by the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act. The bill could add up to 1 million more jobs, largely because of a provision that would fund transportation projects. Under the proposal, the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act is increased from a \$110 million program to \$1 billion. TIFIA is intended to leverage federal funding for regionally significant transportation projects through loans, loan guarantees and other financing mechanisms.

FOCUSED ON FREIGHT

Securing a TIFIA loan to widen Highway 91 is one of many Inland area priorities. The bill also provides federal funding. But unlike previous bills, in which lawmakers were able to include provisions for freight, this bill is focused on freight.

particular projects, local transportation officials said the strategy now is to pers on solving problems prevalent in the Inland area.

If a federal bill is to benefit the Inland area, local transportation officials said, it through the region. A national policy and funding to improve cargo corridors su lines could provide a way to get some needed transportation projects.

“Forty percent of the goods coming into the U.S. flow through this region,” said of the Riverside County Transportation Commission. “The national economy d transportation network.”

Now it is a matter of convincing lawmakers to make goods movement a priority

“There isn’t enough money generated at the local level to address a national p be addressed in a national framework.”

That national focus would have a direct and potentially huge impact on local hi to help freight, officials said, it would mean more money in Riverside and San l overpasses and underpasses, more lanes on local highways and expanded in

DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES

The Senate bill would cost \$109 billion over two years. Lawmakers have identi revenue and unspent money from the federal Highway Trust Fund — to cover scrambling to come up with an additional \$12 billion to fill in the gap in accorda such legislation to be paid for up front.

“I don’t think this \$12 billion is a major hurdle in a country that has a budget the said.

In the House, Transportation Committee Chairman John Mica and Speaker Jo have said they prefer a longer, five-year plan. While the details have not been November that the House bill would contain an energy production component offshore oil and gas drilling. Proceeds would help pay for the transportation po

Many Democrats — including President Barack Obama, who has veto power - making the House bill more difficult to pass than the Senate bill, which already support.

“The path of least resistance would be for the House to compromise and basic probably with some changes that the House Republicans want,” said Orski, the

Locally, hope remains that a compromise can benefit the Inland area and beyo

“Historically, transportation bills have been some of the least partisan,” said Aa the Riverside County Transportation Commission. “There is broad agreement states need infrastructure.”