

Use the Highway Trust Fund to Pay Only for Highways

More than 10 months have passed since the federal transportation budget expired, and astonishingly, no action appears close as we approach the one-year expiration mark.

During this time, the Administration and Congress have had to enact several emergency funding measures—continuing resolutions—to keep the federal transportation funds flowing and transportation-related agencies open.

Rumors about what ultimately will be in the Administration's transportation reauthorization proposal abound. In addition, House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chair James Oberstar has already issued his version of a reauthorization bill. What Representative Oberstar's version does, and what the Administration's version is expected to do, is further expand the scope of projects on which federal Highway Trust Fund money may be spent.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what each federal reauthorization since 1991 has done: make federal highway monies more "flexible." That so-called flexibility means using gas taxes not just for highways, but for "nonmotorized" transportation—including sidewalks and hiking and bike trails—as well as for transit and even completely unrelated projects such as museums.

All of this flexibility over the last two decades dovetails—not coincidentally—with an increasingly deteriorating highway system. Two separate fed-

eral commissions to study the issue have put the *annual* highway-funding shortfall at \$89 billion—and that's just to maintain our existing roads and bridges.

Throughout this same period, the federal gas tax sat at 18.4 cents per gallon. Some of the more thoughtful voices in Congress are finally recognizing that if the federal Highway Trust Fund is refocused solely on its original purpose—the nation's critical highway system—a huge increase in the gas tax will not be necessary.

So, why not let the Highway Trust Fund pay for our highways as intended, and let general revenues address the other expenses? That is already happening to a limited extent through the supplemental continuing resolutions process. Making that shift complete and permanent won't be easy, but it makes more sense than further flexing our federal Highway Trust Fund and then fighting for a large fuel-tax increase that will still leave our nation's highways underfunded and falling apart.



Don Gagnon

Don Gagnon
President and Chief Executive Officer
AAA Mid-Atlantic

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PUBLISHER

Terry Rubritz

SENIOR EDITOR

John C. Moyer

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Rebecca L. Rhoades

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR

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Clint Bradt, Publisher Representative, 913/856-8954

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