

PB Washington Update - March 6, 2012 - Interim Report

There were two major developments today in the effort to pass a multi-year surface transportation authorization bill – neither of which are very encouraging.

In the House, press reports indicate that House Speaker John Boehner has sidelined House T&I Committee Chairman John Mica (R-FL) and now appears to be relying instead on Rep. Bill Shuster (R-PA) to revise HR 7, the House reauthorization bill, so that it can garner enough votes to pass. Shuster is a senior member of the T&I Committee who currently chairs the Railroad Subcommittee. Speaker Boehner's goal is to develop a bill that can attract some Democratic votes while avoiding the loss of Republican votes on both the right and left. House leaders appear to blame Mica for the inability to write a bill that could pass on the floor despite the fact that it was the leadership who insisted on originally cutting the funding by 30%, tying controversial energy provisions to the bill and shifting gas tax revenues away from the Mass Transit Account. It is unclear whether the House will proceed with a revised five-year bill or scale it back to two years (really 18 months) as Boehner previously suggested. Also complicating matters, the House will be on recess next week.

Earlier today, the Senate failed to invoke cloture on Majority Leader Reid's substitute amendment to S. 1813, the two-year reauthorization bill, by a vote of 52 to 44 (60 votes were needed). This vote was an attempt by Reid to cut off debate and proceed to pass his substitute amendment which encompasses all the various titles of the surface transportation bill plus 37 amendments agreed to by the bi-partisan leadership. This loss does not kill the bill, but it will prolong debate and likely will result in a deal to permit debate on a number of controversial, non-germane amendments such as the Keystone XL pipeline, offshore tax havens, EPA regulations of industrial boiler emissions, etc. With the March 31 expiration of the current short-term extension of SAFETEA-LU looming, any delay in floor action or the addition of controversial provisions is a serious concern.