



## **Federal Transportation Bill and what it means for Idahoans** (Written by our partner, Elaine Clegg of Idaho Smart Growth)

The Senate passed the six-year transportation reauthorization bill dubbed the **DRIVE Act** on July 29 with a 65-34 yes vote. It also voted 91 to 4 on a three-month (to October 29, 2015) extension of surface transportation programs. The extension was necessary because the House is unwilling to tackle a long-term bill until after the summer recess. The notion is that between now and October the House will develop a long-term bill and the Senate and House versions will then be sent to a conference committee to iron out any differences.

Congress has not passed a transportation bill lasting longer than two years since 2005; Wednesday's temporary transportation funding extension is the **34th patch that has been passed since a 2005 multi-year highway bill expired in 2009**. The short term bills make it difficult for the state of Idaho and local governments to plan for long-term transportation improvements and the uncertainty leads to less effective use of the funding that is available.

The biggest hurdle to a long-term bill is money – the lack of enough funding. Current taxes, primarily a gas tax, are estimated to be about \$16 billion per year short of funding the program as currently authorized and **have not been increased since 1993** despite lagging far behind construction expenses as cars have become more fuel efficient.

The Senate bill calls for using a one-time corporate tax repatriation to pay for several years' worth of road and transit projects. Many have noted that this is not a sustainable solution. The \$46 billion in non-transportation-related funds, fees and accounting maneuvers that were cobbled together for the next three years' worth of expenses include borrowing from revenues that won't be collected for up to ten years in the future. We question whether it is fiscally responsible pay for three years of transportation investments by borrowing from future taxpayers.

While the Senate is to be commended for taking the lead in moving beyond the repeated short-term extensions to the nation's

transportation program, the bill that was voted on represents major missed opportunity for real reform. Besides failing to find a sustainable solution to the funding, the bill fails to find innovative and future looking transportation solutions for America.

The bill had a chance to give cities, towns and local communities of all sizes more control over and access to federal transportation dollars.

**Thank you to everyone who contacted Idaho's Senators** asking for their support of a bipartisan amendment from Senators Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Cory Booker (D-NJ) to direct more funding to towns and cities of all sizes, unfortunately it failed to receive a fair hearing on the floor. Rather, the DRIVE Act reduces the overall amount of funding that would fall under local control to invest in locally driven projects.

We commend the Senate for recognizing the importance of the freight program, but sadly the bill restricts 90% of the freight dollars to highway projects and ignores "last mile" and port connections, rail improvements and other solutions needed to break through America's freight bottlenecks. The need for grade separated rail crossings in small Idaho towns, improving connections at key freight destinations and creating a seamless system that can move freight between truck and rails **will continue to fall short of Idaho's needs.**

A section was included that was meant to streamline the review and treatment of historic assets. The people who actually complete those reviews tell us the changes proposed will make their work more time consuming and uncertain.

There are a few positive steps. For instance the bill **preserves the Transportation Alternatives Program**, which has been especially popular with Idaho communities funding nearly \$7 million worth of local bicycle and pedestrian projects over the last two years. It also preserves funding for public transportation in general. Without local option sales tax authority this is the only dedicated transit funding most Idaho communities can access.

In addition the bill **includes an important Safe Streets Act** provision that ensures a more comprehensive approach to road design and safety for everyone and the country's passenger rail policy is included in the surface transportation program for the first time. There is expanded eligibility for federal TIFIA financing for transit-oriented development (TOD) projects and projects that promote transit

ridership and walkability, which could help the Treasure Valley deal with congestion and air quality issues.

We are thankful to the Senate for attempting to move beyond short-term extensions toward a multi-year bill. The final product needs to do more than span a longer term. **We will alert you** when the House takes up their bill and look forward to working with Idaho's House delegation to support an integrated transportation system that moves freight and people to support economic development, mobility and access to jobs, services and goods that this county and Idahoans need for a vibrant future.