

## **Road money in jeopardy**

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February 14, 2005

Tennessee road projects will be cut significantly next year if Congress does not pass a new transportation bill at a funding level of \$284 billion over six years.

Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) Commissioner Gerald Nicely believes if the bill is not passed, Tennessee will lose \$200 million next year.

A new bill was introduced in Congress last Wednesday that would replace the fifth Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21) extension and increase the current funding level by \$28 billion.

The TEA-21 was enacted in 1998 and expired Sept. 30, 2003. Several extensions have kept funding levels for Tennessee at about \$600 million per year.

"We've been able to get by pretty well so far on these extensions, but we're getting to the point where that won't be the case," Nicely said. "So we'll have significant cuts on what our program will be next year."

Nicely said TDOT has factored the \$200 million into the upcoming fiscal year's preliminary budget.

"The budget that I presented to the governor two weeks ago was based on essentially having a new transportation bill at about that level - \$284 billion," Nicely said.

TDOT has not prepared an alternative budget yet, but Nicely said the money would have to come from road projects.

"We have done everything else we can in terms of cutting," he said. "There will simply be less projects."

Kent Starwalt, executive vice president of the Tennessee Road Builders Association, said his association is working closely with Tennessee's Congressional Delegation to ensure the passage of the new bill.

"They've extended the program for 18 months, and we need to get the reauthorization bill passed as quickly as possible," Starwalt said, adding that otherwise regular maintenance of Tennessee roads could be in jeopardy.

U.S. Rep. Don Young (R-Alaska), chairman of the House Transportation & Infrastructure Committee and co-sponsor of the legislation, said he believes Congress has a much better chance of moving the bill quickly now that legislators "are working with the same top line funding level that the President has endorsed."

Previous delays were caused by disagreements of the overall funding level and the distribution of funding for donor states.

Donor states, among them Tennessee, are states that receive less federal tax dollars than they submit. Tennessee currently receives about 90 cents for each dollar it sends to the federal government.

The Senate has yet to introduce its version of the legislation, said Nick Smith, spokesperson for Sen. Bill Frist's Office.

“Sen. First ... is going to work with his colleagues to ensure that Tennessee and other donor states are treated more equitably under this bill...”

States and local communities are rightly concerned by Congress’ delay in reauthorizing the road money, said Greg Hinote, chief of staff to U.S. Rep. Jim Cooper.

“There seems to be a consensus that once the White House and Congressional leadership agree on a number, the bill will get done pretty quickly,” Hinote said.

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