

U.S. Senate Finance Committee Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-Utah)
Highways Conference Floor Statement, December 1, 2015
As Prepared for Delivery

Mr. President, throughout my time as Ranking Member and now Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, finding money for surface transportation infrastructure has been a persistent and seemingly intractable problem.

Even as we went into this year with a new Republican majority in the Senate, none of us could have imagined that we could find a way to provide five years of solvency and stability for the Highway Trust Fund. And yet, with today's announcement of the completed conference report, that is precisely where we are right now.

The conference report for the Fixing American's Surface Transportation Act will hopefully be enacted in a few days' time. As the very first member of the Conference Committee to sign the report, I want to briefly talk about the process by which the legislation came about and how we got to where we are now.

Immediately before the Memorial Day recess, there was an unsuccessful attempt to put together a package to possibly get the Highway Trust Fund through the rest of 2016. The agonizing difficulty we faced at that time in dragging ourselves through another 18 months gave us a desire to think bigger than we had before.

This is why I was determined to help find a way out of the cycle of short-term infrastructure bills and why I believed it was necessary for us to think outside of the proverbial box and look everywhere for potential offsets.

Generally, the Finance Committee is responsible for the financing title of any highway bill that goes through the Senate. Usually, we do our best to work within our committee's jurisdiction to identify offsets. However, because those resources have been quickly drying up, we had to look elsewhere for this package.

After the committee spent weeks examining numerous options and alternatives, I was able to present our distinguished Majority Leader with a list of offsets that, while not necessarily ideal, would allow us to put together a long-term highway bill without raising taxes or increasing the deficit.

I am very pleased with the work we were able to do there as that list of offsets formed the basis of the funding for the long-term deal we'll likely be voting on in short order.

As we continued on, by the end of July, the Senate had managed to pass a bipartisan infrastructure bill with three years of solvency, funding, and certainty for the Highway Trust Fund.

Though we were required to enact another short-term extension before the August recess, momentum had begun to build in both chambers for a long-term highway bill.

Mr. President, common practice on highways over the past few years has been to enact short-term extensions and then go and complain about the dysfunction in Congress before moving on to the next order of

business. The offset package produced by the Senate showed that we could do things differently and, for the first time in almost two decades, a long-term transportation bill was actually possible.

After the August recess, the House began working off of the Senate bill as a template for their own legislation. And, after they passed a remarkably similar bill in November, the Conference Committee came together to produce the legislation announced today.

While I'm not one who likes to count chickens before they've hatched – no pun intended – I'm optimistic that the bill will pass with a strong, bipartisan vote.

Putting these offsets for this long-term bill together has truly been a group effort. As I mentioned, we searched far and wide for offsets and that required a number of chairman and committees to work together, and I commend my colleagues for their efforts and their willingness to do what it took to make the endeavor successful.

I especially want to thank Senator Thune and the Commerce Committee, who assisted these efforts by providing for the transfer of certain motor vehicle safety penalties to the Highway Trust Fund.

I also appreciate the work of the House Financial Services Committee and Congressman Randy Neugebauer, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Financial Institutions and Consumer Credit. He was able to identify a new and important offset for the infrastructure bill, a feat which few have been capable of. While, as is often the case around here, some were very quick to throw out criticisms of individual offsets and were less willing to offer suggestions for suitable alternatives, Congressman Neugebauer, in response to concerns about an item in the original Senate offset package, came forward to produce a viable – and score-able – alternative that was able to garner bipartisan support and ultimately broaden the overall support for this long-term deal.

Back in July, when the Senate first proposed a long-term bill, many said we couldn't do it without raising taxes. When we passed our first bill, these same people claimed that it stood no chance of passing in the House. Now, just a few months later, both chambers are a few days away from considering a conference report built upon the foundation laid by that same Senate bill.

This legislation provides a longer extension than the vaunted SAFETEA-LU extension, which many had long viewed as a model for a multi-year highway bill. In fact, you would need to go back at least to the late 1990's to find a highway reauthorization of comparable duration.

Like I said, this major bipartisan and bicameral success was unthinkable just a few months ago. And, while I do want to acknowledge that we still face the problem of outlays from the highway trust fund outpacing dedicated revenues, this bill will give us a much needed five-year break from the deadlines and cliffs that all too often dictate how we deal with the Highway Trust Fund.

It is, quite simply, a great example of what we can do when we work together. And, I'd just like to briefly note that these types of victories for good government have been piling up all year under the current Senate majority.

We do need to start thinking now about more permanent solutions on highways. But, once we pass this bill, we'll be in a better position than at any time in nearly two decades.

That, as they say, is nothing to sneeze at.

Before I conclude, I just want to pay tribute to Chairman Inhofe and Chairman Shuster who led a Conference Committee that was able to sift through various issues and put together a very complex piece of legislation in a matter of just a few weeks. These two chairmen deserve a lot of credit for their efforts, as do all the members who took part in the conference.

Today Congress is making significant headway toward implementing the longest highway reauthorization bill in more than 15 years. We've heard time and again that a long-term highway bill would only be possible if we included a big tax increase. Yet we've been able to defy the odds and provide much-needed funding for America's bridges, highways, and roads for the next five years.

This marks a watershed moment for our transportation community, who will now have the security and stability they need to plan, implement, and complete critical infrastructure projects.

Of course, while we've crossed a major hurdle today our job is not yet over. There is still one more vote to go. But, I'm confident we'll get there.

I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to complete our work and ensure a strong multi-year highway bill is signed into law this year.

And, I look forward to working with all of my colleagues on whatever challenges lie ahead.

With that, I yield the floor.

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