Transportation bill hits roadblock
By Walter Alarkon - 09/11/09 06:20 AM ET

Backers of the transportation bill have moved to option B — a three-month extension of the existing law, instead of the 18 months the Obama administration requested.

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) has pushed to avoid extending the existing law, but one of his top lieutenants on the committee, Rep. Peter DeFazio (D-Ore.), said it would be “reasonable” to extend the law to the end of the year.

DeFazio noted that a short-term extension is his own preference and that it isn’t shared by Oberstar, who wants his bill passed this month.

But a new transportation bill has virtually no chance of passing. Oberstar’s six-year proposal, which would fund federal road, rail and public transit projects, has yet to be marked up in his committee, and the House Ways and Means Committee hasn’t come up with a way to pay for it.

The existing law ends Sept. 30 and the Senate is moving ahead with an 18-month extension, a move first proposed by the White House.

DeFazio argued against an extension lasting until the middle of 2011, arguing that it would lead to the loss of 2 million jobs.

The bill extending the law should hit the Senate floor within two or three weeks, said Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.), chairwoman of the Environment and Public Works Committee.

She told The Hill that the 18-month extension was the best option because it would last until the transportation funding in the $787 billion stimulus expired. After the end of the extension and the stimulus projects, lawmakers could take a fresh look at transportation policy, she said.

The bill, approved 18-1 by her committee in July, would set aside $41 billion for transportation projects
next year and another $20.5 billion for projects in the first part of 2011. The funding, combined with approximately $30 billion in stimulus transportation money, would be a 50 percent increase in funding over what is already law, Boxer said.

Oberstar’s spokesman, Jim Berard, said that while Oberstar is still committed to passing his bill, it must move soon if it is to pass on time. Berard said the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee needs to mark the bill up by next week if lawmakers want a floor vote on it before the end of the month. Neither Oberstar’s panel nor the Ways and Means Committee has scheduled hearings on it.

Robert Puentes, a transportation policy expert and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, said that lawmakers will want to avoid long delays in passing a new bill. The existing transportation bill was passed in July 2005, almost a year and a half after the previous bill had expired.

Puentes said that at least one extension is inevitable, because lawmakers have yet to hash out the funding mechanism. Business groups, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, have supported a hike in the 18.4-cent-per-gallon gas tax, the traditional way to fund the transportation bill. DeFazio has proposed a new tax on oil speculators.

“There’s a funding reality that has to be dealt with that hasn’t been dealt with in an earnest way yet,” he said. “We’re far from solutions right now.”

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