

Editorial

A road map or a road to ruin?

The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure has laid out a \$500-billion blueprint of highway, bridge, rail and green projects. The problem is, it hasn't found a way to pay for it.

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It's remarkable what Congress can do when money is no object, as the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure demonstrated when it put out a [blueprint for a reauthorization bill](#) to govern the nation's spending on transportation. It's a cornucopia of goodies that's getting strong reviews from interest groups, mainly because it gives them nearly everything they've been asking for: Environmentalists get a new bureaucracy to encourage green projects, public transit agencies get a big influx of cash, high-speed rail enthusiasts get new trains, and states get billions in additional money to build and improve roads, bridges and highways.

There's just one small detail that has been left out -- so far, the committee hasn't identified a way to pay for any of this. And the price tag is breathtaking: \$500 billion over six years, a 53% hike over federal transportation spending in the previous six.

As much as we appreciate getting an advance look at House Democrats' thinking on the transportation bill, they seem to be putting the caboose before the locomotive. The blueprint lays out some forward-thinking ways of reinventing the transportation finance system, whose structure was created in 1956 and is badly in need of an overhaul. But it puts off until later the far more important questions about funding, and without those answers, the blueprint amounts to little more than a utopian fantasy.

Funding is so crucial because it's in such short supply. The federal gasoline tax of 18.3 cents per gallon, which hasn't been raised since 1993, is no longer bringing in enough money to pay even the existing highway bills, let alone allow for the kind of spending hike the House committee is proposing. The situation is so dire, in fact, that the trust fund for highway improvements is on the verge of running dry and is projected to need an emergency infusion of up to \$7 billion in September.

The last time Congress passed a transportation reauthorization was 2005, and that bill expires on Sept. 30. To some extent, our current woes are the result of lawmakers' shortsightedness then. It was already clear four years ago that the gas tax was no longer adequate to pay for the country's infrastructure needs, yet Congress made no serious attempt to raise the tax or identify other sources of funding. Among the results are that 37% of lane miles on the National Highway System are in poor or fair condition, one of every four bridges is structurally deficient or functionally obsolete, and the percentage increase in miles traveled on the nation's highways is three times the percentage increase in lane miles since 1995. Translation: gridlock, especially in big cities such as Los Angeles.

The administration is seeking to delay the transportation bill for an additional 18 months, urging Congress to draft a shorter bill that would maintain the status quo in the interim. The Transportation and Infrastructure Committee responded with a [letter to President Obama](#) saying it intends to push ahead regardless.

We'll reserve judgment until we see the committee's funding proposal. But it takes a lot of chutzpah to propose such a huge spending increase in the midst of an economic depression, after the country has racked up nearly \$800 billion in stimulus spending and is considering a healthcare plan estimated to cost north of \$1 trillion over 10 years. For now, this bill may be a bridge too far.