Transfer
Surface Transportation Policy Project's Electronic Update

IN THIS ISSUE

- Senate Braces for Debate
- House Proposal Expected
- Agreement on Bill Expected
- USCM Pledges Support
- Houston Light Rail Approved
- Orlando Sales Tax Rejected

Announcements

On December 7-9, the Center for Transportation Excellence hosting the conference, "Transit Initiatives and Communities: Lessons Learned", in Tempe, AZ, to equip local groups with the tools they need to be successful with tranist initiatives. For more details, visit www.cfte.org.

Subscribe to Transfer
Transfer Archives

November 10, 2003; Volume IX, Issue 22

Senate Environment Committee Braces for Debate on TEA-21 Renewal Plan

Leaders of the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee have scheduled November 12 for action on their renewal plan for key portions – highways and research titles – of the nation's surface transportation law, known as TEA-21.

Late last month, the top leaders of the Committee – Senators Jim Inhofe (R-OK), Jim Jeffords (I-VT), Kit Bond (R-MO) and Harry Reid (D-NV) – unveiled their bipartisan agreement, breaking an impasse that has dominated the Committee's efforts for some time. The Committee leaders now hope to jumpstart the TEA-21 renewal process by approving the panel's legislative package before Congress adjourns November 21.

The 477-page legislative proposal largely follows many of the key elements of the Administration's renewal proposal, known as SAFETEA, which was unveiled earlier this year. In fact, the Senate bill uses the SAFETEA title for its proposal. While drawing extensively from the Administration's renewal plan such as its legislative emphasis on project delivery and clean air conformity changes, it does depart on program funding levels, proposing substantially higher spending levels than the President's plan. The Senate panel leaders have not provided details on how their plan's higher funding levels will be supported, although it appears that new taxes have been ruled out and it is widely speculated that general funds are being targeted.

In addition to the lengthy proposal, Committee leaders November 10 released details of their own amendments, known as the "managers' amendment", which outlines 66 pages of amendments to their bipartisan agreement. The bill and the managers' amendment will be brought before the 19-member Senate Environment and Public Works Committee for their consideration and approval on November 12. Already, scores of additional amendments are being prepared by Committee members to offer during the Committee markup.

The Committee leadership plan generally sets forth how the lion's share of TEA-21's program resources are to be allocated among states and within the states, including key policies and rules governing how federally-assisted projects at the state and local level move forward. Transit funding is handled by the

Senate Banking Committee, which plans no action until next year.

STPP coalition partners are now focusing on a number of specific amendments to the legislation, while evaluating what the overall bill and its lengthy managers' amendment propose for existing policies and practices. Among the coalition partners' concerns are adequate funding for the CMAQ program anticipating additional areas coming into the program, higher funding for the newly-created Safe Routes to School program and increased investment (i.e. PL funds) in the capacity of metropolitan planning organizations so they can shoulder new responsibilities.

The Committee’s aggressive schedule to bring the bill up for action before Congress adjourns was driven by public criticism by highway industry leaders, state transportation departments and others that key Congressional panels had failed to move forward with legislative proposals providing for a multi-year renewal of TEA-21. The nation’s surface transportation law expired September 30; last month current law programs and policies were extended for five months, expiring again on February 29, 2004.

To view a copy of the letter sent to EPW members by the STPP Coalition visit http://www.transact.org/PDFs/Senate_EPW_letter.pdf

---

House Proposal Expected Before Congress Adjourns

Leaders of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee are continuing their work on their renewal plan and have pledged to release details of their TEA-21 renewal plan next week before Congress adjourns.

Unlike the Senate package, the House panel bill is not expected to deal with all of the key issues before the Committee, focusing largely on the program structure and funding issues, including distribution of funds to the states.

Conferees Expected to Finalize FY'04 Transportation Appropriations Bill

House and Senate appropriators are expected to meet this week to reach an agreement on the Fiscal Year 2004 Transportation, Treasury and Independent Agencies bill.

STPP and several partner organizations recently wrote to Senators Richard Shelby and Patty Murray (D-WA), leaders of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation, to convey the coalition’s priorities during upcoming conference committee negotiations. The key issues raised in the STPP partners’ letter were Amtrak, the Jobs Access and Reverse

Commute Program (JARC), New Starts, Scenic Byways and funding for the Federal Transit Administration.

To view a copy of the letter, go to: http://www.transact.org/PDFs/Senate_Appropriations_letter.pdf

---

Nations Mayors Stand with Chairman Young and House Panel Leaders

Citing growing maintenance costs and demand for new transportation priorities and job creation, leaders of The U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) November 6 pledged to support a $375 billion funding level for highway and transit programs at an event with Chairman Don Young (R-AK), Ranking Member James Oberstar (D-MN), Subcommittee Chair Tom Petri (R-WI) and Subcommittee Ranking Member William Lipinski (D-IL), the four key leaders of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

USCM President and Hempstead Mayor James Garner, Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels and other Conference leaders indicated the nation’s mayors support a higher funding level because of the transportation needs at the local level. Local governments own 75% of 4 million miles of highway and roads; over 50% of all bridges; and manage about 90% of the nation’s transit systems. Also speaking were Akron Mayor Donald L. Plusquellic, who discussed the need for more local empowerment over regional transportation decisions, and Long Beach Mayor Beverly O’Neill, who recommended greater federal support for intermodal facilities like the Alameda Corridor project in order to handle growing freight traffic.

“The support of the Mayors is vital to our effort to provide the federal funding needed to address America’s growing congestion and highway safety problems,” noted Chairman Don Young (R-AK).

Although the House leaders noted mayors and other local elected officials are key to engaging Members of Congress to successfully pass a $375 billion, six-year transportation bill, they have not announced their intentions on how they will address the mayors’ call for increased local decision-making authority.

For more information on The U.S. Conference of Mayor’s transportation event, visit www.usmayors.org.

Houston Voters Approve Light Rail Plan, Other Measures Considered Around the Nation

The nation's 4th largest city reached a turning point last week when Houston voters approved a $640 million bond measure to accelerate construction of light rail, as well as authority to build a total of 72 miles of new rail service and expanded bus service. The November vote specifically provides funding to build and operate 22 miles of new light rail and expand bus service over the next ten years, linking residents to major destinations and employers such as the central business district, the University of Houston downtown campus, Rice University, Texas Medical Center, and several shopping malls. Passed by 52 percent of voters, the proposition will fill the local funding gap for the next phase of the $7.5 billion "Metro Solutions" regional transit plan.

"It's a victory for our city, it's a victory for the next generation and generations to come," expressed Houston Mayor Lee Brown at a celebration event on 11/4/03.

The overarching "Metro Solutions" plan includes a total of 72 miles of light rail, 8 miles of commuter rail, and a 50 percent increase in bus service. METRO developed the plan for "options, accountability, and affordability" with the input of citizens at more than 175 public meetings over a year and a half period. Supporters included elected officials from all levels of government, developer and business-based interest groups such as Houston Association of Realtors, Greater Houston Partnership, and Central Houston, Inc. and a spectrum of transit allies including the Houston Chronicle, NAACP – Houston Branch, Harris County AFL-CIO, the Sierra Club, and Mothers for Clean Air.

House Majority Leader Tom DeLay (R-TX) and Representative John Culberson (R-TX) have stated they will uphold their promise to secure federal funding for the METRO Solutions plan despite prior efforts to block funding. The 7.5 mile downtown line scheduled to open in Houston on January 1, 2004 is being built entirely with local funds. METRO may go back to voters to move forward with the third phase of the plan in 2009.

For more information on the Houston "METRO Solutions" plan, visit http://www.hou-metro.harris.tx.us.

Grand Rapids Voters Boost Transit Funding

In action on other ballot issues, voters in Grand Rapids and Tucson also made decisions on transit investment. A proposal to increase funding for public transit in Grand Rapids, MI won handily in last week's elections, by a margin of 2 to 1. The six cities served by the Grand Rapids transit agency passed a smaller property tax increase in 2000, which this vote continued and increased. This year's proposal had an improved margin over the original 2000 vote, something supporters say is due to the improved transit service that has been visible since 2000. The current proposal is expected to generate over $9 million next year.

The coalition in support of the proposal included churches, city leaders, riders, ordinary citizens, and several prominent businesses in the area, including the Grand Rapids Chamber of Commerce, and Mayor John Logie of Grand Rapids. For more on the transit services funded with the proposal, see http://www.grata.org/.

Tucson Voters Reject Light Rail Initiative

In Tucson, a proposal to fund improved and expanded transit services through a sales tax increase was rejected by 63 percent of voters. In voting precincts close to the city's core, support for the transit plan was overwhelming – in some precincts 70 percent and higher voted for the measure. The proposal was defeated mainly by voters in outlying areas, where opposition correlated roughly with distance to downtown. Because of the high support in areas that would be served by the proposed light rail corridor, supporters are now considering creating a special tax district for the measure.

Tucson has voted down several transportation sales tax measures in the past: in 1986, 1990, and 2002. Last year's proposal, a well-funded, city-sponsored transportation sales tax initiative, failed in every precinct of the city. Supporters of this year's initiative say that they have tapped into a transportation formula that can garner support at least in some areas, and that any future transportation plans will have to include alternative transportation components to win over the voters. For more on the initiative, see http://www.savetucson.org/.

For more details on 2003 transit referenda, visit the Center for Transportation Excellence at www.cfte.org

---

Orlando Voters Reject Sales Tax for 20-Year Mobility Plan

In action last month, Orlando voters rejected a half-cent sales tax increase that would have raised $2.6 billion over 20 years on a broad package of transportation projects. The "Mobility 20/20 Plan" plan called just over half of the tax revenues to be spent on road and highway expansions, including widening Interstate 4 by adding four toll lanes to the existing eight free lanes. Other projects included $300 million for improving rail traffic flow and grade separations, $45 million for building sidewalks, $15 million for 20-30 miles of trails, $20 million for transit capital improvements such as new buses and shelters, and $60 million for installing "smart systems" for timing lights to manage traffic flow. About $400 million was to be dedicated to the development of two new light-rail lines and one commuter rail line.

The measure's defeat surprised business and political leaders, who had predicted an easy win based on polls showing high public support. Boosters spent $1.5 million promoting the measure. But 23% of voters turned out to reject the plan by a margin of 54% to 46%. Critics of the plan included anti-tax groups who said they were able to tap into a general mistrust of government along with an anti-tax sentiment among the public in down economic times. The plan was also criticized by faith-based and social equity advocates for dedicating a greater share of tax revenues to road expansions than transportation alternatives, and for having little to offer low-income residents. Many opponents were also critical of the plans for light-rail, saying it was a potential boondoggle.

Transfer is written and edited by the staff of the Surface Transportation Policy Project. Readers are invited to reprint newsletter items; proper citation is appreciated. If you are not currently subscribed, please visit http://www.transact.org/transfer/sign.asp . Be sure to include your full mailing address and name of your organization, phone and fax numbers. For comments and suggestions about Transfer's content, contact Charlie King at cking@transact.org