

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Transportation bill headed for clash

On Sept. 4, House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.) and ranking member James Oberstar (D-Minn.) jointly introduced a transportation bill that is likely to cause some sparks from the budget-cutters when it comes to the House floor. The bill, the Building Efficient Surface Transportation and Equity Act, dubbed Bestea, re-authorizes the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), which expires on Sept. 30, and provides \$103 billion for highways, highway safety, and mass transit over three years. According to committee documents, this is a 30% increase in funding compared to the last three years of ISTEA.

The bill is also a vehicle for a battle that Shuster, Oberstar, and many others on the committee have been waging for some time, to take the transportation trust funds off-budget and spend them on transportation needs, instead of using them to paper over the budget deficit. The most recent skirmish in that battle was around the budget resolution on May 20, when Shuster sponsored an alternative budget plan that would have increased transportation spending by \$12 billion over five years. Shuster's alternative was defeated by only two votes, and was one factor that helped precipitate a split in the Republican caucus over the leadership of House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.).

The bill was passed unanimously out of the Surface Transportation subcommittee on Sept. 10, and is scheduled to be marked up by the full committee on Sept. 18, though it is not clear whether it will come to the House floor before the end of the fiscal year on Sept. 30. Shuster maintains that the bill, even though it spends transporta-

tion trust funds for transportation needs, will not increase the budget deficit by one penny. However, House Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio) is expected to oppose the bill on the basis of defending last spring's budget deal which was signed into law in July.

GOP compares public education to communism

On Sept. 10, in the middle of a week in which Republicans were promoting their "school choice" programs, Bob Schaffer (R-Colo.), in remarks on the House floor, compared public education to communism. "Government-owned schools have a complete monopoly, plain and simple, and all monopolies fear competition," he said, claiming that an inferior product is always produced if shielded from competition. To see how this works, he said, "just look at the communist legacy in every single case, especially education. The bureaucrats who just love their government-owned schools and want to protect their monopoly will do so at just about any cost, regardless of whether kids have to receive an inferior education and blighted futures."

Many Democrats were outraged. Rosa DeLauro (D-Conn.) called public education "the great equalizer," and said the Republicans will "work as hard as they can to see the destruction of public education." The next day, Chet Edwards (D-Tex.) said that "to mention our public schools in the same breath with communism is extremism at its worst. . . . I would suggest this is the type of extremist belief that has caused great problems for the modern-day Republican Party."

Lurking in the background, are various proposals sponsored by GOP-

ers to expand "school choice," including school vouchers and education savings accounts, all of which would take money out of the public education system. Democrats, while strongly defending the principle of public education, are hamstringing themselves because of their support for the "New Age" education programs in public schools that so many people are rightly opposing.

House rejects funds for needle-exchange programs

The House voted 266-158 on Sept. 11 to prohibit Federal funding of all needle-exchange programs. The vote was on an amendment sponsored by Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.) to the Labor-Health and Human Services Appropriations bill, which eliminated language allowing such funding if it were shown that needle-exchange programs help reduce the spread of AIDS and don't encourage use of illegal drugs.

Hastert, during the debate, argued that free needle-exchange programs not only don't reduce the incidence of HIV infection, but actually have the opposite effect. In addition, "when we are spending \$34 or \$35 million to tell our children that we should not smoke . . . why then should we even think about beginning to give away free needles whose only purpose is to shoot an illegal drug, heroin, a free needle that leads to a child, a young person's path down the slippery slope that begins with drug use, illness, and many, many times, eventually death."

Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) added that Federal money should not be used to facilitate an act which is a felony.

Opposition to Hastert's amendment, mostly from Democrats but also a handful of Republicans, centered,

not so much on the supposed efficacy of needle-exchange programs, but rather on the language that was eliminated. Charles Rangel (D-N.Y.) warned that the discussion of giving addicts clean needles could lead to someone arguing, "Why do we not give them purified drugs . . . where they will be protected under doctor's advice," or even to consideration of legalization. "But," he concluded, "because I do not know . . . exactly how many lives are lost because of contaminated needles, I am prepared to leave it up to the secretary of Health and Human Services and not make that political judgment myself."

Clinton China policy under new assault

On Sept. 11, Sens. Spencer Abraham (R-Mich.), Russell Feingold (D-Wisc.), and seven conservative Republicans introduced the "China Policy Act of 1997." The bill coheres with British-directed geopolitical efforts to disrupt a positive U.S. relationship with China.

In a press conference, Abraham and Feingold chastised China on human rights and arms proliferation issues, and complained that the Clinton administration does not have a policy toward China. Feingold said that "the message the United States is sending to China is that human rights doesn't really matter." The message of the bill, he said, is "that Congress cannot and will not accept China's deplorable human rights record, nor will it accept business as usual with China."

Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.), one of the bill's co-sponsors, declared that the Clinton administration's policy of engagement with China "has failed . . . and the premise that economic free-

dom will ultimately and inevitably lead to political freedom is an untested premise in which there is no evidence in China that it's happening."

The timing of the bill, six weeks before the official state visit of Chinese President Jiang Zemin to Washington, is no accident. Connie Mack (R-Fla.), another co-sponsor, said of the summit that, since Chinese entry into the World Trade Organization is off the table, the only interest China has in it is "a public relations victory." Hutchinson added that if President Clinton only takes "more of the same" to the summit, then "I don't see the purpose of it because it will only accrue to the benefit of the Communist government in China."

The bill, as described by Abraham, will apply a series of sanctions ostensibly aimed at changing Chinese behavior, including denying visa applications to Chinese officials alleged to be involved in political and religious persecution, and stricter enforcement of the ban on importation of products made with prison labor. The bill would also expand funding for Radio Free Asia and Voice of America broadcasts into China, and gives \$2 million to the National Endowment for Democracy to be spent exclusively on programs for China.

Deadlock threatened over campaign finance reform

Supporters of campaign finance reform are threatening to deadlock the House and Senate if there is not a vote on campaign finance reform legislation before the end of the year. The leadership in both Houses indicated upon return from the August recess that campaign finance reform was not on the agenda, causing great agitation among proponents.

In the Senate, Minority Leader Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) announced on Sept. 11 that all 45 Democrats had signed onto the McCain-Feingold reform bill, which has received much press but little action since its introduction on Jan. 21. Three Republicans, including original sponsor John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Senate Governmental Affairs Committee Chairman Fred Thompson (R-Tenn.), have already signed on, giving it a total of 48 co-sponsors, and Daschle is appealing for just two more in an attempt to force a vote on the issue. He vowed that the same effort that was made for the minimum wage increase last year, and the disaster relief bill this year, will be made to pass the McCain-Feingold bill.

Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott (R-Miss.), on the CBS News program "Face the Nation" on Sept. 14, said he was not ready to bring campaign finance reform to a vote, especially before the conclusion of the Government Affairs Committee's investigation into the financing of the 1996 Presidential campaign. But, he said, "I am discussing [with McCain] how we could do it at some point." Lott added that he thought McCain was sincere in wanting "to do it in a way that's fair and that would level the playing field," but there are two other bills that also have to be looked at.

Meanwhile, House Democrats are employing obstruction tactics in an attempt to bring some kind of campaign finance reform bill to a vote there. George Miller (D-Calif.) has been using parliamentary means at his disposal to slow down and disrupt House proceedings, including demanding roll call votes on procedural motions and minor matters, as a form of protest. Democrats have also been peppering floor proceedings with one-minute speeches on the issue.