

Congressional Closeup by Carl Osgood

Transportation bill is approved in House

On April 1, the House passed a \$217 billion surface transportation bill by an overwhelming vote of 337-80. The bill re-authorizes the 1991 Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA), and mandates that revenues that come into the transportation trust funds over the life of the bill be spent on transportation needs. Attempts by budget-cutting ideologues, led by Budget Committee Chairman John Kasich (R-Ohio), to stop the bill with a highway program privatization proposal, were steamrolled. Kasich's amendment was defeated by a vote of 318-98.

However, President Clinton indicated a couple of days after the vote that he thought the bill was too big. While acknowledging the importance of highway spending, he said, "Such spending must be within the balanced budget and should not crowd out critical investments in education, child care, health care, or threaten our budget discipline."

The bill provides \$181 billion for highway construction and safety programs, and \$36 billion for mass transit. It reforms allocation formulas so that states receive at least 95% of what they contribute in Federal gas taxes. It strengthens safety programs that target high-risk roads, hazard mitigation, and road-rail crossings; increases funding for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration; and dedicates \$570 million for border infrastructure related to increased North American Free Trade Agreement-related trade.

Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bud Shuster (R-Pa.) argued for a national transportation policy. "There is a greater need to tie our country together," he said, "to make sure that the national interest is

protected, as well as state and local interest." He gave several examples, such as the seaport of Seattle-Tacoma, Washington, and the crossing of Interstates 35 and 40 in Oklahoma City, to demonstrate that transportation bottlenecks in such areas have ramifications all across the country because of the nature of interstate trade.

Plan to pass IMF funds without a vote exposed

On March 31, Reps. Ron Klink (D-Pa.), Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.), Dennis Kucinich (D-Ohio), and Cliff Stearns (R-Fla.) held a press conference to expose a scheme they said would secure approval of the International Monetary Fund supplemental appropriations bill in the House without floor debate. Klink said, "I am fearful that the House may approve only the defense and disaster supplemental, and not vote on a separate IMF funding bill, only to have a conference report come back to the House with IMF funding already in it." The IMF supplemental funding is included in the Senate version of the bill, but not in the House bill. An amendment by Klink to ensure a separate vote in the House on the IMF funding was rejected by the House Rules Committee on March 30.

Klink said that some had accused him of being "paranoid about the possibility of IMF funding coming back from the Senate without any input from the House. I would reply that if we are going to do campaign finance reform bills in 40 minutes, with no amendments and two-third votes required for passage, if we are going to vote on financial services legislation that is written behind closed doors and hasn't seen the light of day until today, if we are going to pay for disaster relief

by cutting housing for the poorest of the poor, well, then, our fears about the IMF funding vote don't sound so funny any more." The conference committee members will be appointed after Congress returns from its Easter recess on April 20.

When asked by *EIR* whether there were support in the House for language in the Senate bill calling for a New Bretton Woods Conference, Klink said that that was the kind of thing which should be debated, if debate were permitted. He said he thought there was "quiet support" in the House for such a proposal.

Budget plan is passed by Senate

On April 2, the Senate passed a budget resolution by a vote of 57-41, which is based on a Republican budget plan, and largely ignores the proposed budget submitted by President Clinton. The debate was dominated by arguments over how to use the projected budget surpluses and any income from the tobacco settlement, should any legislation be passed, as well as Democratic complaints that the plan shortchanges education and health care.

The resolution sets forth that any budget surpluses be used to reform Social Security, and that tobacco-derived monies should go to Medicare. Democrats, such as Byron Dorgan (N.D.), argued that tobacco money should go to anti-smoking programs. "It doesn't make any sense at all," he said, "to write handcuffs into this budget resolution that stop us from using the proceeds of the tobacco settlement to do the very things that we are having the tobacco settlement for in the first place."

On education, Democrats have

been calling for programs for hiring 100,000 new teachers and for more school construction. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) complained that the resolution cut education by \$1.6 billion below the President's request, and "to make matters worse, the Republican budget prohibits funding for new education programs."

Judd Gregg (R-N.H.) countered that "the Federal government does not have a responsibility" for education funding, and that this has always been and should continue to be the province of state and local communities.

After the vote, President Clinton criticized the budget resolution, warning, "The budget now being drafted . . . simply does not meet these urgent national priorities."

House passes supplemental appropriations bill

On March 31, the House passed its version of the emergency supplemental appropriations bill by a vote of 212-208. The narrowness of the vote reflects major differences between the House Republicans on one side, and the White House and the Senate on the other. While the bill provides most of the funding requested by the Clinton administration, the \$2.9 billion in emergency funding is offset by cuts in domestic programs, including over \$2 billion in public housing programs and \$366 million in contract authority for the Federal Aviation Administration's Grants in Aid for airports.

Democrats were angry about the offsets, and about the rule of debate under which the bill was considered. Only one amendment was allowed, even though 32 were submitted to the Rules Committee. Tony Hall (D-Ohio) said that with so few amend-

ments allowed, "Members will not be able to fully represent their constituents during the floor amending process."

Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) said that under existing law, emergency appropriations did not require offsets, and warned of the effects of the offsets that Republicans had chosen. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.) said that the cuts in public housing could leave 800,000 people homeless. David Obey (D-Wisc.) said that the amount of funding for disaster relief in the bill was far less than what the President had requested.

Appropriations Committee Chairman Bob Livingston (R-La.) downplayed the effects of the offsets. "All we are saying on the supplementals, is that, sure, we can continue to spend, but it has to be within the budget," he said. He added that the offsets come from "unobligated funds," that is, money not needed this year, and it can be addressed later if it should be needed. Livingston said that additional disaster relief funds will be provided for in a later bill. The House received an additional \$1.6 billion request from the administration the day after the bill was reported out of committee.

Campaign finance reform killed amid maneuvering

House Speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) made good on a December promise on March 30, to allow a House vote on campaign finance reform, despite the fact that the McCain-Feingold bill is already dead in the Senate. However, the way he did it ensured that any comprehensive reform legislation brought to the floor would be defeated.

The McCain-Feingold bill seeks to

limit "soft money" spent on political campaigns, and to restrict issue advocacy by independent groups during an election campaign. Most Republicans oppose the bill.

Four bills were brought to the House floor under suspension of the rules, a procedure normally reserved for noncontroversial bills, which limits debate, doesn't allow amendments, and requires a two-thirds vote for passage. Only one of these dealt with campaign financing, and it increased contribution limits (by a factor of 3 in some categories), the opposite of what reformers have been demanding. It garnered only 74 votes, with 337 opposed.

Sam Gejdenson (D-Conn.) called the procedure "campaign finance reform destruction," and said that while the amount of money spent on election campaigns has skyrocketed, voter participation has declined. He added that the process under which the bill was brought to the floor was "horrific," and one "the Politburo under Joseph Stalin would have been proud of." Minority Leader Richard Gephardt (D-Mo.) called the bill "phony" and decried the fact that it was brought to the floor in such a way as to preclude amendments and alternatives being debated, including from reform-minded Republicans.

One reform-minded Republican, Chris Shays (Conn.), told the *New York Times* before the vote, "The bottom line is McCain-Feingold would pass the House because there would be enough Republicans to join Democrats." He denounced the process used as unfair, and said that the House "is not the Senate, thank goodness, and it should not take a supermajority to pass meaningful campaign finance reform." Shays, usually an ally of Gingrich, is leading a discharge petition to force out of committee the House version of the McCain-Feingold bill.