

Transportation by Anthony K. Wikrent

Highway bill: a road to nowhere

While the nation's infrastructure collapses with the economic crisis, Washington's policy continues to travel in circles.

In late November, the House and Senate passed a compromise 1992 Surface Transportation Act. While the bill significantly increases the level of federal funding for highways, bridges, and mass transit, it is actually another example of the inability of both parties to lead the nation out of its economic morass. The bill will not even begin to reverse the effects of over a decade of chronic underfunding of both capital improvements, and maintenance.

The bill provides \$151 billion for land transportation over the next six years. It authorizes \$119.5 billion for highways, or \$19.9 billion a year, for a 40% increase in funding over previous years. Of this, \$24 billion would be earmarked for a new Surface Transportation Program that could be used for either highways or mass transit in metropolitan areas. Only \$16 billion is designated for bridge replacement and repair, and \$31.5 billion is allocated to mass transit, or about \$5.3 billion a year.

By contrast, the Federal Highway Administration has estimated that during the 1980s, the U.S. accumulated a \$493 billion backlog of deferred maintenance just for highways. The non-profit Road Information Program in Washington estimates that half of the nation's 4 million miles of roads are coming apart due to neglect, and more than 250,000 bridges need to be replaced. The Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials has estimated that \$17.6 billion of federal funding is needed in 1992 simply

to maintain the nation's highways in their present condition, and had recommended that \$21.45 billion of federal funding be provided yearly for highways. Over the bill's six years, that would have meant \$128.7 billion.

The new bill makes a big deal out of allowing much greater flexibility to states and localities to determine how the federal monies will be spent. Some state and local officials are jubilant that they will finally be able to direct funds to the most urgent local projects, but no one can ignore the fact that the required capital improvements vastly exceed the funding made available. The \$5.6 billion a year for mass transit provided in Washington's latest bill will barely cover the cost of building a mass transit system in one large city, let alone what is really needed: a national system that ties together local mass transit with a nationwide high-speed rail system.

Moreover, many localities will be forced to use much of the funding for studying the environmental impact of new construction. According to a Sept. 11 report by the Federal Highway Administration to Congress, "The Clean Air Act of 1990 requires extensive new analysis in order to demonstrate the conformity of transportation plans, programs, and projects with state air-quality implementation plans. Failure to complete a conformity finding will prevent the advancement of new transportation facilities (highway or transit) with federal funds within the affected area." The Surface Transportation Act

provides that in areas which do not meet the stringent 1990 Clean Air Act Amendment, every penny of money meant for highways can be shifted to mass transit, if the federal government agrees. There are few large cities that presently meet the Clean Air standards.

A major oversight of the legislation is that it ignores the issue of freight transportation. Road congestion in Los Angeles, for instance, has become so terrible that the city is considering banning all truck traffic on highways during normal business hours. And U.S. railroads—to which free market theorists point to show how "efficient" private enterprise is—have established such a consistent record of damaging valuable freight and losing entire carloads for weeks that, for the past three decades, shippers have relied increasingly on trucking; this, despite the fact that the cost of rail transport is at least one-seventh the cost of road transport. The result is that today, U.S. railroads are used mainly for moving massive quantities of bulk commodities, such as coal or grain.

The Senate-House conferees mandated that \$500 million over six years be taken from the already-pillaged Highway Trust Fund, to be combined with \$225 million in "new" money, for building a full-scale prototype magnetically levitated rail system (maglev). While the \$120.83 million a year allocated to maglev compares favorably to last year's \$9.5 million, it should be noted that Germany and Japan hold a significant lead in maglev research over the U.S., and Germany can be expected to soon begin commercialization. Moreover, Congress missed a golden opportunity to ensure that a coherent national system of high-speed rail is developed, instead of a hodge-podge of different systems for each state.