



Maine officials aren't sure what to make of Trump's infrastructure plan yet

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Good morning from Augusta, where the State House is pretty quiet this week in the lead-up to Thanksgiving.

So, we'll look to one of President-elect Donald Trump's biggest policy plans after an often unspecific campaign — injecting the mind-boggling sum of \$1 trillion into infrastructure projects in the next 10 years.

It has only been vaguely outlined by Trump's team, but the Republican aims to do this through a private financing scheme that gives a tax credit to those who would finance projects. They're billing it rather hopefully as revenue-neutral, saying tax credits could be repaid through increased tax revenue on projects.

This idea is getting criticism from both the left and right: An architect of President Barack Obama's stimulus plan called it "a massive corporate welfare plan for contractors" in The Washington Post, while the libertarian Cato Institute it will likely finance "pointless projects" and won't fix infrastructure problems.

The big rub here is that states can already borrow lots of money at low interest rates to fund road, bridge and other transportation projects: Maine voters approved a \$100 million bond for that purpose in November.

This is a complicated federal problem, with the Congressional Budget Office saying in 2014 that \$157 billion in additional revenues would be needed to maintain the current level of transportation spending through 2024.

The federal gas tax hasn't increased since 1993. Gov. Paul LePage has opposed raising it at the state level, but earlier this year, he publicly mulled ways to get electric and hybrid cars to contribute to road funding.

Matt Marks, CEO of the Associated General Contractors of Maine, said he was happy that Trump is discussing the future of transportation funding, but more details are needed to evaluate his plan. He added that private financing may only be part of an overall fix, which likely has to include a gas tax increase.

“I like the idea of some private financing, but I think it’s really going to come down to a market where you can borrow at very low interest rates,” Marks said.

The LePage administration backed that bond and the governor has endorsed Trump. But his transportation commissioner, David Bernhardt, the head of a national group of commissioners, declined comment on Trump’s plan through a spokesman on Monday, saying he wants to learn more about it.

Maine’s congressional delegation also had a somewhat muted reaction, while stating support for infrastructure investment generally.

Spokespeople for U.S. Sen. Susan Collins, a Republican, and Sen. Angus King, an independent, saying in a joint statement they’re “encouraged that President-elect Trump identified rebuilding our nation’s crumbling infrastructure as one of his top priorities when he assumes office” and “they both look forward to reviewing the details of the President-elect’s proposal.”

“I can’t comment on something that doesn’t exist yet,” said Brendan Conley, a spokesman for U.S. Rep. Bruce Poliquin, a Republican from the 2nd District. “However, the Congressman does support investment in infrastructure and believes that it is certainly needed in Maine.”

And U.S. Rep. Chellie Pingree, a Democrat from the 1st District, said she has “a lot of questions about the details, specifically on the impacts of private financing” and will “be looking closely at what exactly President-elect Trump presents to Congress.”