

THE TENNESSEAN

Congress failed on road funding, so Tennessee must lead

David Plazas

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Congress has sent a strong signal to the states that it is not serious about developing a long-term comprehensive plan to pay for highways and roads across the United States.

The Senate and House of Representatives dealt with a May 31 deadline to pass the [Highway and Transportation Funding Act of 2015](#) by approving only a two-month budget extension.

That means they will be at it again before July 31, and then what?

It has been 10 years since Congress passed a six-year highway funding bill — that used to be the norm — to provide states clarity and direction. The uncertainty in today's political climate has led states like Tennessee, Georgia, Utah and Arkansas to stop bidding on major transportation projects, [according to a USA TODAY report](#).

Tennessee doesn't have enough money to build new roads, and by next year the Volunteer State won't be able to afford to maintain roads properly. Meanwhile, there are \$6 billion to \$8 billion in unfunded road projects across the state.

Not all is lost, however. This is precisely the trigger needed to empower states to develop their own comprehensive solutions to address their transportation and transit needs.

Now is the opportunity for Gov. Bill Haslam and even mayors across the state to develop plans they can present to legislators and voters for approval.

Pay-as-you-go state

Gov. Haslam and legislators have called for a comprehensive approach to dealing with transportation funding, but no action was taken during the 2015 legislative session. This latest development shows Tennessee cannot wait for a federal solution.

Tennessee is a pay-as-you-go state, and the state gas tax — which has not been raised in 26 years and yields \$657.8 million per year — only provides enough money for the state to maintain its roads, not build them.

A state comptroller report [released earlier this year](#) warned that Tennessee's gas tax revenues won't be sufficient by next year to cover road maintenance.

The state's gas tax of 21.4 cents per gallon has not been raised since 1989. The federal gas tax of 18.4 cents per gallon, which has not been raised since 1993, collects \$34 billion annually. At present the federal government runs a \$13 billion annual deficit in highway and roads funding because fuel tax revenue stopped growing in 2007.

Tennessee 'now in crisis'

In a May 13 news release, Tennessee Infrastructure Alliance Executive Director Susie Alcorn [said](#): "Tennessee's transportation system is now in crisis. At a time when our state is growing — in terms of population and economy — we no longer have the ability to create and maintain a transportation infrastructure to support it."

The alliance is part of the [Transportation Coalition of Tennessee](#), which was created to educate lawmakers and citizens about the need to pay for and maintain the Volunteer State's transportation system, which is critical to our commerce, tourism and quality of life.

The coalition reports that unfunded road projects in Tennessee range from \$6 billion to \$8 billion. Imagine not being able to maintain or build roads as the Nashville area population grows by 1.2 million over the next 25 years.

Congestion is bad now, and [most commutes](#) in Middle Tennessee exceed 20 minutes (one third exceed 30 minutes). Just think of how that might be in five or 10 years without any improvement in transportation or transit.

While there are plans in place from the Tennessee Department of Transportation, Nashville Metropolitan Transit Authority, Middle Tennessee Regional Transit Authority and the Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization, implementing these plans costs money.

Alternative solutions

Think tanks like the libertarian Cato Institute and the liberal Brookings Institute have reported that states are starting to find — and more must find — solutions to their transportation needs independent of congressional action.

Brookings [reported](#) that tollways on interstate and non-interstate highways have risen by 15 percent since 2003 to provide additional money for states.

Cato has [urged states](#) to look at solutions like new mileage-based fees where drivers would be charged for road use.

While there has been a call for raising the gas tax at both the state and federal level, there is little political will to do so.

In February, state House Speaker Beth Harwell [said lawmakers were unlikely](#) to raise the gas tax in 2015, although they were interested in broadening the base of transportation funding.

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Chattanooga, [proposed a gradual 12-cent increase in the federal gas tax](#), but was rebuffed by those in his own party. Every extra penny would bring in \$2 billion in new revenue.

On May 13 he [spoke with reporters in Tennessee](#) about highway funding and said: "I will be stunned if Republicans deal with the Highway Trust Fund responsibly. It's not going to happen."

Six days later the House of Representatives passed the two-month budget extension by a vote of 387-35. All nine members of Tennessee's congressional delegation voted for it.

The Senate passed the bill by a voice vote on May 23, and it was sent to President Barack Obama on May 26.

Our citizens should encourage the governor to come up with a plan soon to address Congress' perennial habit of kicking the proverbial can down the road.

Tennessee is good about developing plans tailored for our needs. We need it more than ever for our roads.

Alleviate the congestion in our politics so the congestion on our roads won't choke Tennessee's growth and development.