

Is America Headed Over The 'Transportation Cliff?'

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Washington: It seems the media enjoy menacing the country with one disastrous cliff or another. Not long ago, it was the fiscal cliff. This time it's the transportation cliff. How do we steer clear of this disaster?

Last week, Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx told The Dallas Morning News that the nation is "headed for another cliff."

"This one," he said, "is a transportation cliff."

Foxx was referring to the federal Highway Trust Fund, which, according to the Transportation Department, is running out of other people's money. Unless something is done in Washington, no federal funds will be available for transportation projects in fiscal 2015.

Sounds scary. But don't be afraid.

Randal O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow who studies transportation issues, has blogged that there won't be "a sudden halt to highway projects and transit systems" should the federal Highway Trust Fund go dry.

"States," he said, "will spend money out of their own accounts, possibly getting short-term loans until the federal funding situation is resolved."

"Rather than a transportation cliff, it would be more accurate to describe current events as a 'transportation pothole.'"

Transportation funding in the U.S. is a sham. Less than \$8 of every \$10 collected in federal fuel taxes is actually spent on highways. More than 20%, O'Toole says, is thrown at mass transit while "Congress often diverts" chunks of the remaining dollars "to such things as bike paths, national park visitor centers, museums, and other local pork barrel projects."

That observation is confirmed by Veronique de Rugy, a senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center who says that "at least 25% of federal gas tax funds are diverted to non-highway uses including maintaining sidewalks, funding bike paths, and creating scenic trails."

De Rugy says "it is clear that the diversion of gas tax funds to non-highway projects is the biggest cause of the underfunding problem."

About three years ago, our news pages reported that between 2005 and 2009, money from the highway account was spent on the Safe Routes To Schools Program (\$612 million), which was designed to make bicycling and walking to school safe and routine; the Recreational Trails Program (\$370 million), which funded hiking, bicycle and snowmobile paths; ferry boat and ferry terminal facilities (\$285 million); the Magnetic Levitation Transportation Technology Deployment Program (\$90 million), which has been charged with creating a magnetic train line that can run at 240 mph; a grant program (\$37.5 million) to prohibit racial profiling; and the National Historic Covered Bridge Conservation program (\$40 million), for the purpose of repairing and improving research and education about, well, covered bridges.

Motorists also have to pump money into the Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program (\$8.6 billion, not million), which makes grants for light rail construction, buses, bike paths, traffic-signal timing and other projects that are supposed to cut air pollution and road congestion.

Those who pay federal fuel taxes should resent that their money is being spent on nonroad projects that are political in nature.

They should also be upset that those who tax and spend the money want more and will wring it out of Americans in other ways if they can't get the fuel tax raised.

The sane and decent arrangement would be for Washington to spend on roads only what it receives in revenues, cut the fuel tax as low as possible and stop spending money from the highway on projects it wasn't intended to finance.

It's not a "cliff." And it's not a political slush fund.