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## Dirt Road Anthem

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After announcing his agreement with 10 senators to compromise on his spending plans on Thursday, President [Joe Biden](#) then announced that he will block his new deal unless he also gets the spending that he just negotiated away. Regardless of how this bizarre drama ends, taxpayers should steel themselves for the likely outcome: Washington is going to spend a lot of money building very little infrastructure.

Regarding the Biden back flip, A Journal editorial [notes](#):

Politicians in Washington renege on their bipartisan promises all the time, but what are we to make of a deal in which one side admits it is pulling a bait and switch from the start? That was the astonishing news Thursday as President Biden and Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) endorsed a bipartisan Senate infrastructure deal even as they said the price of their support is getting the rest of their agenda too.

Mr. Biden stood with five Democratic and five Republican Senators at the White House and endorsed their trillion-dollar infrastructure outline. Back-slapping and self-plaudits all around. But two hours later the President said he won't sign the infrastructure bill unless the Senate also passes the other \$3 trillion or more he has proposed in tax increases and multiple new entitlement programs.

As for his first Thursday announcement, according to an official [White House transcript](#), here's how President Biden began his remarks to reporters following his meeting with the bipartisan group of senators:

THE PRESIDENT: We had a really good meeting. And to answer your direct question, we have a deal. And I think it's really important — we've all agreed — that none of us got what we — all that we wanted. I clearly didn't get all I wanted. They gave more than, I think, maybe they were inclined to give in the first place.

But this reminds me of the days we used to get an awful lot done up at the United States Congress. We actually worked with one — we had bipartisan deals. Bipartisan deals means compromise.

One of the things that I've — I've made clear: I've signed on — and I'm going to let them give you the detail because — and you can ask them — and I'm — I will — I will talk to you all later, in the next hour or two. What- — I promise you I'm not going away.

This column won't try to precisely interpret that last paragraph. Clearly the overall thrust of his remarks was that he and the senators had reached an agreement in which nobody got everything they wanted. But within hours he was back demanding everything he wanted.

More bad news is that even if the president sticks to the deal he struck with the senators, it won't be kind to taxpayers. Even without most of the phony Biden redistribution programs labeled as "infrastructure," the plan still isn't going to build that much infrastructure.

According to a summary of the bipartisan deal, of the \$579 billion in new federal spending above and beyond the "baseline" spending that is already expected, less than 19% will go to the category described as "Roads, bridges, major projects."

And even the money that really is spent on infrastructure won't go very far. Recently in the Washington Post of all places, columnist Catherine Rampell did a nice job explaining the problem:

The United States is notoriously bad at this. We pay much more per unit of subway track or road tunnel, for instance, than other developed countries. Five of the world's six most expensive subway lines are in New York City, according to the Transit Costs Project database maintained by New York University's Marron Institute of Urban Management.

Likewise, a new tunnel in Seattle cost around \$1.6 billion per mile, more than three times the per-mile cost of a recent tunnel in Paris and more than seven times that of one in Madrid, according to institute fellow Alon Levy.

Construction costs for the U.S. interstate highway system have also risen dramatically since the mid-20th century, according to a study from scholars at George Washington University and Yale. These patterns are not readily explained by labor or materials prices.

Following Washington Post policy, Ms. Rampell then somehow managed to lay this problem at the feet of Republicans. Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute has more on the underlying causes:

Federal spending on infrastructure comes tied to labor and environmental rules that raise costs and slow projects. Federal DavisBacon labor rules generally require that workers on federally funded projects be paid union-level wages, which raises wage costs an average of about 20 percent. Federal environmental rules delay highway projects. The authors of a report prepared for the Obama administration found that the average review time for highway projects increased from 2.2 years in the 1970s to 6.6 years by the 2010s. Biden's plans would likely raise costs and slow projects further.

Former President Donald Trump made significant headway in addressing this problem. But President Biden cares so deeply about ensuring that infrastructure projects are time-consuming and costly that he took action to reverse some key Trump reforms on his very first day in office. A report from the law firm Kirkland & Ellis summarized the action:

**Revocation of Trump-era Permitting Executive Orders.** The first of the revoked Executive Orders operated such that the [White House Council on Environmental Quality] had the power to designate certain projects as "high priority" and therefore designate permit milestones for such

projects. Another revoked Executive Order was intended to increase efficiencies in the environmental review process by requiring all federal agencies to execute a single NEPA document under the “One Federal Decision” policy. In addition, the revoked Executive Order had reduced the breadth of environmental reviews and imposed a two-year time limit on infrastructure project reviews. President Biden’s revocation of these Executive Orders indicates an intention to advocate for a detailed permitting and environmental review process for new infrastructure projects, with a particular focus on applicable environmental considerations and consideration of climate change impacts.

Even if Mr. Biden ends up keeping his word to senators, taxpayers probably won’t like the results.