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Surface Transportation Policy Project's Electronic Update

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Senate to Begin Debate on TEA-21 Renewal Legislation, Larger Issues Threaten Bill

The Senate is poised to begin debate on its SAFETEA plan, legislation that renews the nation's surface transportation law through fiscal year 2009.

Senators are expected to debate and act on amendments throughout the week of April 25, with the first vote occurring on a cloture motion (i.e. agreement limiting time of debate) scheduled for April 26.

If the Senate doesn't complete action on the bill by April 29, it would resume its deliberations during the week of May 9, at the earliest.

The central transportation issue now before the Senate is legislation's funding level, with the President strongly opposed any efforts to raise funding above his \$284 billion request. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) has been steadfast in his commitment to defend the President's request.

As if the money struggle isn't problematic enough, it now appears that controversial judicial appointments may be brought up for a vote at the same the Senate is deliberating on the transportation bill, with the potential for triggering what could be an unprecedented effort to undo the Senate's rules on filibusters (lowering the threshold on closing debate from 60 votes to a simple majority).

Transportation leaders have been pressing for swift action on the SAFETEA in an effort to steer clear of this politically polarizing action, which is being described in Washington as the "nuclear option."

Transit Share, Stormwater Program among Key Issues in Senate Debate

While it is still unknown what amendments will be offered during the Senate action on SAFETEA, the funding share for transit and funds for stormwater-related improvements on the federal aid system will certainly be part of the Senate debate.

Senate proponents of transit investment are pressing Senate leaders to correct the funding imbalance between highway and transit programs. When the SAFETEA legislation was considered by the Environment and Public Works Committee last month, the funding commitment to transit programs was reduced from \$53.3 billion to \$51.6 billion. Since that time, Senators, particularly those on the Senate Banking, Housing and Urban

Affairs Committee, have asked for adjustments to the transit share during Senate action on the legislation.

Joining with the American Public Transportation Association, STPP and its many partners have made the transit share a top priority for this renewal, with many groups urging a higher share for transit programs, particularly in this period of rising fuel prices and uncertain gasoline supplies.

The bill's stormwater provisions have been targeted by state transportation departments and highway groups, who are urging Senators to strike this small set-aside of Surface Transportation Program funds. Under the original amendment that was championed by Senators John Warner (R-VA) and Lincoln Chafee (R-RI) and adopted during action last year in the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, states would reserve about 1/3 of a penny on each dollar provided in this bill for state and local projects on existing highways on the federal aid system, making improvements to modernize drainage and other facilities to minimize stormwater pollution impacts.

Stormwater discharges are significant contributors to water quality degradation, with local governments under the Clean Water Act shouldering most of the public costs for addressing stormwater pollution, including costs and loadings attributable to highways on the federal aid system. For obvious reasons, state transportation departments and road advocates like the status quo, since local taxpayers through property taxes and sewer and water rates are actually bearing the costs of cleaning up the pollution from federally-designated transportation networks, rather than highway users.

Harkin Introduces "Safe and Complete Streets Act of 2005"

Last week, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) introduced the "Safe and Complete Streets Act of 2005" (S. 794), legislation that proposes several changes to strengthen the institutional commitments of U.S. DOT, state transportation departments and metropolitan planning organizations to safer walking and bicycling and raise federal resource commitments to related infrastructure improvements and research.

In addition to key provisions that promote the adoption of "complete streets" policies by state transportation departments and MPOs, the legislation incorporates the Safe Routes to School and the Non-motorized Pilot programs from the House-passed TEA-21 renewal bill (H.R. 3). S. 794 also directs the U.S. Transportation Secretary to set goals for walking and bicycling and focus research dollars to make these choices safer. The legislation gives states more flexibility to use current law authority on safety (full federal share) on qualifying projects that promote the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists.

Senator Harkin is working to incorporate provisions of S. 794 into the Senate's SAFETEA proposal. For further information on S. 794, go to - <http://thomas.loc.gov/>

Debate on Amtrak and Future of Passenger Rail Moves Up on Agenda

The Bush Administration wanted a thorough debate on federal funding commitments to Amtrak, the nation's intercity passenger rail corporation, and that is what it is getting. However, as Congress engages these issues, the Administration's reform package is quickly becoming just another plan among others.

Earlier this week, the bipartisan leadership of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee introduced its "Rail-21" legislation, proposals that more closely follow the Committee's legislation from the last Congress, rather than the Administration's plan, which was unveiled last week.

A key Subcommittee of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee held its first of several planned hearings, where the Administration's FY'06 Budget Request and zero funding strategy was unpopular with Senators on the panel.

On April 21, Amtrak's President and Board of Directors released their proposals for meeting Amtrak's funding needs in FY'06, calling for a \$1.8 billion funding commitment and recommendations that offer different views on the debate. All in all, it was a busy week for Amtrak, the Administration and Congress, which is now working on a multi-year Amtrak reauthorization bill.

In the budget process, Congressional budget leaders are also working to reach an agreement on a budget plan for the new fiscal year, where it was the House of Representatives, not the Senate, that stepped up and assured continued funding for Amtrak during the next fiscal year. The Senate was headed that way as well, but promises by key Senate leaders to head off an Amtrak bankruptcy forestalled a reversal of the President's "zero funding without reforms" proposal on the Senate floor.

Nation Scores Poorly on Its Traffic Signal Systems

In an exhaustive study on how state and local agencies manage their traffic signalization systems, the Institute of Traffic Engineers (ITE) gave the nation a D- in its first-ever report card, basing its conclusions on a detailed survey of 378 state and local transportation agencies in 49 states.

Releasing the National Traffic Signal Report Card just days before the Senate is scheduled to begin debate on its TEA-21 renewal plan, the report's findings suggest that Congressional transportation leaders, and their many state and local transportation partners, are systematically overlooking key opportunities to offer the public immediate congestion relief, improved air quality and gas savings.

According to the report, an investment of less than \$1 billion annually or about 1 percent of current highway spending by federal, state and local agencies would earn an A in

performance, resulting in a reduction of 5-10 percent of all traffic delay. The report also found that benefits of investing in improved signal timing delivers a 40:1 return on investment.

At the April 18 press event releasing the report, National League of Cities President and Washington, DC Mayor Anthony Williams spoke of his city's successful efforts to address signal timing, earning the city a B rating. In order to invite full responses to their detailed survey questionnaire, ITE's report does not release data on the performance of individual states, counties and cities, leaving that up to each of the survey respondents to share their data.

For more information on this report, go to --
www.ite.org/reportcard/

Canby Addresses Oberstar Forum on Transportation Financing Issues

STPP President Anne Canby joined a distinguished group of transportation officials and shared her views on transportation financing issues as part of the 2005 Oberstar Forum, held April 17-18 at the University of Minnesota.

Canby in her remarks emphasized the need for transportation leaders to better connect their investment programs to what the public wants if they expect to be successful in finding additional resources for their transportation programs. Canby reviewed some of the current challenges before states in financing transportation needs, explaining that many state programs are too focused on short-term revenue gains and are losing sight of what is needed in building public consensus on increased revenues.

For Canby's full statement, go to -http://www.transact.org/transfer/docs/University_of_Minnesota_remarks.doc

New Research Summaries on Active Living Now Available

Active Living Research has released three new research summaries that present solid science in a format useful for policy makers, planners, developers, public health officials and others working for more active communities and reduced childhood obesity. Each 4- to 6-page brief summarizes the latest research findings on the links between health and the way we build communities, presenting results from the latest peer-reviewed studies as short bullet points.

A new summary, *Designing to Reduce Child Obesity*, shows the importance of giving children better access to healthy choices for both physical activity and nutrition. Updated versions of *Designing for Active Transportation* and *Designing for Active Recreation* present newly published research as well as new charts and graphics. All three can be downloaded from the Active Living Research website at -

http://www.activelivingresearch.org/index.php/What_We_are_Learning/117.

Active Living Research, a national program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, encourages and supports cross-disciplinary research about environmental factors and policies with the potential to substantially increase physical activity among Americans of all ages, incomes, and ethnic backgrounds.

TrailLink 2005 Scheduled for Minneapolis/St. Paul in late July

The Rails-to-Trails Conservancy (RTC), a nonprofit organization that is working to create a nationwide network of public trails from former rail lines, is holding its biennial conference, TrailLink 2005, July 27-30 in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. It features workshops on public health, trails policy, design and management and offers many opportunities to network with experts from around the globe, focusing on advocates of trails, bicycling, the environment and healthy lifestyles.

For more information about TrailLink 2005 please visit www.railtrails.org.

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