



For immediate release: June 29, 2012

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Federal Transportation Bill a Disappointment for New York

Bill maintains funding and avoids transit cuts, but rolls back safety and environmental protections

In response to the announcement of a conference committee deal to authorize the federal transportation program through September 2014, transportation advocates expressed disappointment at the bill's lack of reforms and at provisions that would make it harder for communities in New York to provide input on major projects and improve street safety:

"While the bill allows the country to avoid a shutdown of transportation funding, it shuts down progress instead," said Veronica Vanterpool, Tri-State Transportation Campaign executive director. "It reduces funding for bike and pedestrian projects, rolls back environmental protections, and incentivizes new road building and driving. It's now up to local and state leaders to fight for a more accountable, environmentally sustainable transportation system."

The bill would make large portions of dedicated pedestrian and bicycle funding optional for states. Currently, less than 3% of federal transportation funding is dedicated for pedestrian and bicycle projects, and local communities rely on these small programs to improve safety and promote economic development.

"Hundreds of New Yorkers are killed and thousands injured while walking and cycling each year -- and this bill won't send much help," said Paul Steely White, executive director of Transportation Alternatives. "New York City must continue to lead, and the state must continue to provide this needed safety funding."

The bill also appears to roll back environmental protections, making it harder for local communities to provide input on major projects that impact their air, water, health, property, and quality of life. It changes the federal TIFIA loan program by removing criteria that considered environmental sustainability, project significance, and other factors. As a result, the program could send more money to states that are building many new roads (like North Carolina and Indiana) and less to states in our region.

The Senate had crafted a forward-looking, bipartisan bill, MAP-21. Unfortunately, many positive reforms that had been included in MAP-21 were dropped from the final deal, including provisions to restore the transit commuter benefit to \$240/month (it fell to \$125/month at the beginning of the year), give transit agencies flexibility over how they spend their federal funds, and focus road and bridge funding on repair and maintenance.

The legislation avoids cuts to public transportation. It would provide new sources of funding for repair of transit systems, and help municipalities build around their rail and bus stations.

“It’s a bitter disappointment that the commuter benefit won’t be restored. While New York does avoid cuts, funding isn’t keeping pace with ridership increases,” said NYPIRG Straphangers Campaign senior attorney Gene Russianoff. “Washington’s provided some help for transit riders, but the city and state will need to step up.”

“Though the bill lacks significant reforms, it does avoid the extreme cuts supported by some in the House,” Tri-State Transportation Campaign Federal Advocate Steven Higashide said. “Thanks in large part to members of New York’s delegation, Congress successfully defeated proposals to cut all dedicated funding for public transportation, walking, and cycling projects. We thank them for their hard work.”

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