

WebMemo



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Next Highway Reauthorization Bill Should Terminate the Transportation Enhancement Program

Ronald D. Utt, Ph. D.

As this Congress and President continue their struggle to reauthorize the federal highway program (now more than two years overdue), their focus should be maximizing the value of each dollar spent by directing available funds to programs that improve mobility and safety on the roads. To do this, Congress should eliminate low-value programs that add nothing to mobility yet pander to influential constituencies and lobbyists, and redeploy these funds to more productive uses.

Heritage has noted that only about 65 percent of federal surface transportation spending is used to support general-purpose roads, while the remaining 35 percent is diverted to high-cost, underutilized programs like trolley cars, transit, covered bridges, hiking trails, earmarks, administrative overhead, streetscapes, flower planting, hiking and bicycle paths, museums, “transportation enhancements,” tourist attractions, and archaeology.¹ In recent months, several Members of Congress have proposed eliminating the Transportation Enhancement program and have introduced legislation to accomplish that goal.

“Enhancements” Defined. Transportation enhancements are among the more useless of the many federal programs that divert highway money to low-value or no-value purposes. Under current law, each state is required to devote 10 percent of the Surface Transportation Program (STP) funds it receives each year from the federal highway trust fund to eligible enhancement projects as defined

in existing statutes. Under legislation extended by SAFETEA-LU (P.L. 109-59), fiscal year 2012 spending authorizations for the STP will total \$9.3 billion, implying that enhancement spending would then total \$930 million that year.

According to current law, enhancement program spending must be limited to the following 12 purposes:²

1. Provision of facilities for pedestrians and bicycles;
2. Provision of safety and educational activities for pedestrians and bicyclists;
3. Acquisition of scenic easements and scenic or historic sites (including historic battlefields);
4. Scenic or historic highway programs (including the provision of tourist and welcome center facilities);
5. Landscaping and other scenic beautification;
6. Historic preservation;
7. Rehabilitation and operation of historic transportation buildings, structures, or facilities;
8. Preservation of abandoned railway corridors;

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(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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9. Inventory, control, and removal of outdoor advertising;
10. Archaeological planning and research;
11. Environmental mitigation; and
12. Establishment of transportation museums.

Alert readers will note that none of the above eligible uses supports transportation in the modern sense of the term. Indeed, these 12 categories have as much to do with transportation and mobility as G.I. Joe dolls have to do with national security.

Example: Virginia's Enhancements. The Virginia Department of Transportation provides detailed information on its enhancement projects, and its annual list illustrates just how silly the program can get, as measured by the misspending on approved projects using scarce federal transportation dollars.³ Among the 82 approved projects costing \$30.2 million for FY 2012 are the restoration of the historic Bull Mill in Scott County, a hiking trail on an abandoned rail bed in Buchanan County, renovation of a former rail passenger waiting area in Danville, renovation of the LaCrosse Hotel, restoration of the Assateague and Cape Henry lighthouses, construction of a pilot schooner for a Norfolk museum, smartphone-based battlefield tours, and gateway signs to various Virginia wine regions.

These Virginia "transportation" projects probably do not differ much from the projects approved in other states, and therein lies the chief reason why both state and federal governments have trouble convincing citizens to agree to pay higher fuel taxes for more "transportation." As a review of the Enhancement program reveals, every state has its own "Bridges to Nowhere," and motorists have the good sense to keep their hard-earned dollars out of the hands of elected and appointed officials who think that projects such as this nonsense—Virginia

also approved funds for interpretive signage at Fort Nonsense in Mathews County—are a good use of taxpayer dollars at a time when many families struggle to put food on the table—while traffic congestion and road deterioration worsen.

Legislative Remedies Would Take Small Steps. In recent months, several Members of Congress have introduced legislation to eliminate the program or to make it optional for states, allowing states to redeploy that portion of their STP funds to legitimate transportation purposes. In early November, Senator John McCain (R-AZ) introduced an amendment to the Senate appropriations bill (H.R. 3288) that would allow states to divert their enhancement funds to other highway purposes, while Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) introduced an amendment to the same bill that would allow states to divert enhancement funds to the Highway Bridge Program. Both amendments lost, failing to overcome bipartisan support for the enhancement program.

Also in November, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) introduced the Long-Term Surface Transportation Act of 2011 (S. 1786) to extend the existing federal highway program for another two years (through FY 2013) and to make certain changes to reform the program. That bill was defeated, and Republicans and Democrats on the Senate Committee for Environment and Public Works have since agreed to a compromise extension that retains the enhancement program, albeit with a few modest changes.

Senators who attempted to end the enhancement program should be commended for their efforts, but it is disappointing to see that in a time of near-record budget deficits, a low-priority program that undermines the U.S. transportation system can consistently receive the support of a majority of the Senate.

1. Ronald D. Utt, "Setting Priorities for Transportation Spending in FY 2011 and FY 2012," Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3141, February 9, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2011/02/Setting-Priorities-for-Transportation-Spending-in-FY-2011-and-FY-2012>.
2. See U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, "FHWA Guidance: Transportation Enhancement Activities," March 25, 2010, p. 4, at http://www.enhancements.org/download/Publications/FHWA_TE_Guidance_March2010.pdf (November 4, 2011).
3. The complete VDOT Enhancement project list for FY 2012 can be found in U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, "FHWA Guidance: Transportation Enhancement Activities."

The yet-to-be released House plan should terminate this program as well as the many other wasteful programs that have become a part of federal surface transportation policy. The best way to achieve this goal would be to allow states the flexibility to use all of their trust fund apportionments for transporta-

tion programs of their own choice, as Heritage has previously recommended.⁴

—*Ronald D. Utt, Ph.D., is Herbert and Joyce Morgan Senior Research Fellow in the Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies at The Heritage Foundation.*

4. Ronald D. Utt, “How to Create an Effective Transportation Program in an Age of Fiscal Austerity,” Heritage Foundation WebMemo No. 3115, January 24, 2011, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/01/how-to-create-an-effective-transportation-program-in-an-age-of-fiscal-austerity>.