



Federalism Issues in Surface Transportation Policy: Past and Present

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Summary

American federalism, which shapes the roles, responsibilities, and interactions among and between the federal government, the states, and local governments, is continuously evolving, adapting to changes in American society and American political institutions. The nature of federalism relationships in surface transportation policy has also evolved over time, with the federal government's role becoming increasingly influential, especially since the Federal-Aid to Highway Act of 1956 which authorized the interstate highway system. In recent years, state and local government officials, through their public interest groups (especially the National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities, U.S. Conference of Mayors, and American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) have lobbied for increased federal assistance for surface transportation grants and increased flexibility in the use of those funds. They contend that they are better able to identify surface transportation needs in their states than federal officials and are capable of administering federal grant funds with relatively minimal federal oversight. They also argue that states have a long history of learning from one another. In their view, providing states flexibility in the use of federal funds results in better surface transportation policy because it enables states to experiment with innovative solutions to surface transportation problems and then share their experiences with other states. Others argue that the federal government has a responsibility to ensure that federal funds are used in the most efficient and effective manner possible to promote the national interest in expanding national economic growth and protecting the environment. In their view, providing states increased flexibility in the use of federal funds diminishes the federal government's ability to ensure that national needs are met. Still others have argued for a fundamental restructuring of federal and state government responsibilities in surface transportation policy, with some responsibilities devolved to states and others remaining with the federal government.

Congressional attention to federalism issues in surface transportation policy tends to increase during reauthorizations of the federal highway and mass transit program. The current highway and mass transit program, the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA; P.L. 109-59), after being extended several times, is set to expire on September 30, 2011. Its reauthorization is expected to generate considerable legislative activity during the 112th Congress. Issues addressed by Congress in the recent past, and expected to receive continued attention, include SAFETEA's funding level and financing, especially proposals addressing the Highway Trust Fund's fiscal sustainability, state funding guarantees, and congressional earmarks.

This report provides an historical perspective on contemporary federalism issues in surface transportation policy that are likely to be addressed by Congress during the 112th Congress, including possible devolution of programmatic responsibility to states and proposals to change state maintenance-of-effort requirements and state cost matching requirements.

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Introduction

American federalism, which shapes the roles, responsibilities, and interactions among and between the federal government, the states, and local governments, is continuously evolving, adapting to changes in American society and American political institutions. The nature of federalism relationships in surface transportation policy has also evolved over time, with the federal government's role becoming increasingly influential, especially since the Federal-Aid to Highway Act of 1956 which authorized the interstate highway system.

In recent years, state and local government officials, through their public interest groups (especially the National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities, U.S. Conference of Mayors, and American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials) have lobbied for increased federal assistance for surface transportation grants and increased flexibility in the use of those funds. They contend that they are better able to identify surface transportation needs in their states than federal officials and are capable of administering federal grant funds with relatively minimal federal oversight. They also argue that states have a long history of learning from one another. In their view, providing states flexibility in the use of federal funds results in better surface transportation policy because it enables states to experiment with innovative solutions to surface transportation problems and then share their experiences with other states. Others argue that the federal government has a responsibility to ensure that federal funds are used in the most efficient and effective manner possible to promote the national interest in expanding national economic growth and protecting the environment. In their view, providing states increased flexibility in the use of federal funds diminishes the federal government's ability to ensure that national needs are met. Still others have argued for a fundamental restructuring of federal and state government responsibilities in surface transportation policy, with some responsibilities devolved to states and others remaining with the federal government.

Congressional attention to federalism issues in surface transportation policy tends to increase during reauthorizations of the federal highway and mass transit program. The authorization for the current highway and mass transit program, the \$286 billion, Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA; P.L. 109-59), was set to expire on September 30, 2009, but has been extended several times. Its reauthorization is now set to expire on September 30, 2011.¹ Issues addressed by Congress in the recent past, and expected to continue to receive attention, include funding levels and financing, especially proposals addressing the Highway Trust Fund's fiscal sustainability, state funding guarantees, and congressional earmarks.²

This report provides an historical perspective on contemporary federalism issues in surface transportation policy that may be addressed by Congress during the 112th Congress, including possible devolution of programmatic responsibility to states and proposals to change state maintenance-of-effort requirements and state cost matching requirements.

¹ P.L. 111-118, the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2010; P.L. 111-144, the Temporary Extension Act of 2010, P.L. 111-147; the Hiring Incentives to Restore Employment Act; P.L. 111-322, the Continuing Appropriations and Surface Transportation Extensions Act, 2011; and P.L. 112-5, the Surface Transportation Extension Act of 2011.

² See CRS Report R41512, *Surface Transportation Program Reauthorization Issues for the 112th Congress*, coordinated by Robert S. Kirk; and CRS Report R40451, *The Donor-Donee State Issue: Funding Equity in Surface Transportation Reauthorization*, by Robert S. Kirk.

Recent Proposals Affecting Federal, State, and Local Government Roles and Responsibilities in Surface Transportation Policy

Several bills have been introduced during the 112th and recent Congresses that would fundamentally change existing federal, state, and local government roles and responsibilities in surface transportation policy. For example, Senator Jim DeMint and Representative Jeff Flake introduced legislation during the 109th Congress and Senator DeMint introduced legislation in the 110th Congress (S. 2823, the Transportation Empowerment Act) that would phase-out most of the federal fuel and excise taxes that support the Highway Trust Fund over five years; preserve federal responsibility for interstate highways, transportation facilities on public lands, national transportation research and safety programs, and emergency transportation assistance; and devolve most other surface transportation programs to states.³ Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison and Representative Jeff Flake introduced legislation during the 112th Congress (H.R. 632 and S. 252, the Highway Fairness and Reform Act of 2011) that would permit a governor to waive the state's right to receive apportioned or allocated funds under the federal-aid highway program and receive instead a prorated amount of the taxes appropriated to the Highway Trust Fund (other than from the Mass Transit Account), which are attributable to highway users in the state. The state would have to have an interstate maintenance program; submit to the Department of the Transportation a plan describing the purposes, projects, and uses for the funding and the federal-aid highway programmatic requirements the state elects to continue; agree to obligate program amounts exclusively for projects that would be eligible for surface transportation program funding; and continue to suballocate surface transportation program funds to urbanized and other areas using certain formulae and rules. In addition, during previous reauthorizations some congressional Members from "donor" states (states whose highway users pay more in estimated federal highway tax revenue to the Highway Trust Fund than that state receives from the program) advocated program devolution as a means to achieve program efficiencies and to address what they viewed as an inequitable distribution of federal surface transportation funds to states.⁴

As will be discussed, recent reauthorizations have focused a great deal of attention on resolving disagreements among donor and donee states concerning the distribution of the program's funds. Because many donor states are located in the South and the Mid-West and many donee states are located in the Northeast, Pacific Rim, and sparsely populated Western states, recent reauthorizations have taken on a regional perspective, pitting states from one region against another. Although most governors and state legislative leaders have been united in their advocacy of additional federal funding with minimal restrictions on the use of those funds, the donor-donee debates in recent reauthorizations have divided them.

³ During the 109th Congress, Senator DeMint introduced the Transportation Empowerment Act in the Senate on April 4, 2006 (S. 2512). It was referred to the Senate Committee on Finance. Rep. Flake introduced a companion bill in the House on April 26, 2006 (H.R. 5205). It was referred to the House Committee on Ways and Means, the House Committee on the Budget, and the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and its Subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Pipelines. During the 110th Congress Senator DeMint introduced an updated version of the Transportation Empowerment Act on April 7, 2008 (S. 2823). It was referred to the Senate Committee on Finance.

⁴ For further analysis, see CRS Report R40451, *The Donor-Donee State Issue: Funding Equity in Surface Transportation Reauthorization*, by Robert S. Kirk.

In addition to legislative efforts to change federalism relationships in surface transportation policy, two SAFETEA-mandated, non-partisan commissions (the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission and the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission) issued recommendations that, if enacted, would lead to significant changes in existing federalism relationships in surface transportation policy.

In December 2007, the National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission released *Transportation for Tomorrow*, a report on the status of nation's surface transportation system. The Commission concluded that "the current Federal surface transportation programs should not be "re-authorized" in their current form [emphasis in original]."⁵ Instead, it recommended a "new user-financed Federal surface transportation program" that is "performance-driven, outcome-based, generally mode-neutral, and refocused to pursue activities of genuine national interest."⁶ The Commission made numerous specific policy recommendations to achieve these goals, including some that would fundamentally change federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. For example, it recommended that 108 federal surface transportation programs be consolidated into 10 programs, with each of the new programs focused on a national goal and organized along functional categories, such as congestion relief, rural accessibility, saving lives, environmental stewardship, and energy security, as opposed to the current practice of organizing most programs by transportation mode. It also recommended that the project development and selection process be streamlined, including changes to the National Environmental Policy Act Process, and that the planning process be refocused from the current "bottom-up" approach to a more "top-down" approach. Under this new planning approach, the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) would work with various stakeholders to establish "appropriate performance standards critical to serve the national interest under the targeted new program structure." DOT would also establish "national transportation targets ... to advance critical national goals for condition of transportation infrastructure, efficiency and mobility, safety, rural accessibility, environmental quality, energy conservation, access to Federal lands, and research."⁷

In February 2009, the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission released, *Paying Our Way: A New Framework for Transportation Finance*. The report concluded that "the federal Highway Trust Fund faces a near-term insolvency crisis, exacerbated by recent reductions in federal motor fuel tax revenues and truck-related user fee receipts" and that baseline revenue projections for the Highway Trust Fund fall short of anticipated transportation needs by nearly \$400 billion in 2010-2015, and about \$2.3 trillion through 2035.⁸ It recommended a 10 cents per gallon increase in the federal gasoline tax, a 15 cents per gallon increase in the federal diesel tax, and "commensurate increases" in all special fuels taxes and indexing these rates to inflation to address the Highway Trust Fund's immediate revenue shortfalls. For the long-term, it recommended a shift from the present reliance on federal fuel taxes to fund federal surface transportation programs to a "federal funding system based on more

⁵ National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, *Transportation for Tomorrow*, Washington, DC: National Surface Transportation Policy and Revenue Study Commission, December 2007, Volume 1, p. 9.

⁶ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, p. 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, Volume 1, pp. 11, 12.

⁸ National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission, *Paying Our Way: A New Framework for Transportation Finance* (Washington, DC: National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Financing Commission, February 2009), pp. 3, 4.

direct forms of “user pay” charges, in the form of a charge for each mile driven (commonly referred to as a vehicle miles traveled or VMT fee system).”⁹

The Highway Trust Fund’s sustainability, and the means employed to retain sustainability, could have a significant impact on federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. For example, some have argued that states should be provided additional flexibility to use tolling and other congestion pricing strategies to both combat traffic congestion and generate additional revenue for surface transportation projects.¹⁰ Others have suggested that sustainability should be achieved by having the federal government supplement Highway Trust Fund revenue with funding from the general fund account. If that took place, it could change the nature of the donor-donee debate, as some of the donor states are donee states in terms of overall federal tax and spending flows. Others have advocated an increase in federal fuel taxes to achieve sustainability in the Highway Trust Fund.¹¹ State officials have historically opposed federal fuel tax increases because, as a practical matter, such increases make it more difficult for states to increase their state fuel taxes, and in principle, they view such increases as an infringement on state sovereignty. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood indicated in February 2009 that he had interest in exploring alternative means to ensure the Highway Trust Fund’s sustainability, including the possibility of a VMT tax, but other Obama Administration officials indicated that the President had no interest in imposing a VMT tax.¹² Still others have proposed taxing oil or transactions in oil futures and options as a means to achieve sustainability in the Highway Trust Fund.¹³

Several other organizations have also advocated changes in federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. For example, the National Conference of State Legislatures has argued that “The Congress should not re-enact SAFETEA-LU and must look at surface transportation anew, authorizing a new program that better meets current and future needs for interstate mobility.”¹⁴ It argued that Congress should articulate a new national vision for surface transportation that focuses on “legitimate federal objectives: interstate commerce and freight mobility; interstate movement of people; national defense and homeland security; safety; environmental and air quality preservation and improvements; and research and innovation” and heeds “the Tenth Amendment and not intervene in or interfere with state-specific transportation priorities.”¹⁵

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁰ For further analysis, see CRS Report RL33995, *Surface Transportation Congestion: Policy and Issues*, by William J. Mallett; and U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Highway Trust Fund: Improved Solvency Mechanisms and Communication Needed to Help Avoid Shortfalls in the Highway Account*, GAO-09-316, February 6, 2009, pp. 19-21, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d09316.pdf>.

¹¹ The National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform, “The moment of Truth,” Washington, DC, December 2010, p. 24, http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/sites/fiscalcommission.gov/files/documents/TheMomentofTruth12_1_2010.pdf.

¹² Washington Post Editorial, “Mr. LaHood’s Good Idea: The transportation chief’s mileage tax shouldn’t be a nonstarter,” *The Washington Post*, February 23, 2009, p. A18.

¹³ H.R. 3379, the Lopsided Oil Prices Act of 2009; and U.S. Congress, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, *The Importance of a Long-Term Surface Transportation Authorization in Sustaining Economic Recovery*, 111th Cong., 1st sess., July 16, 2009, H.Hrg. 111-50 (Washington: GPO, 2009), p. 15.

¹⁴ National Conference of State Legislatures, “2010-2011 Policies for the Jurisdiction of the Transportation Committee - Surface Transportation Federalism,” http://www.ncsl.org/Default.aspx?TabID=773&tabs=855,30,674#Surface_Transportation.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

This will not be the first time that Congress has considered proposals to alter federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. Congress has debated the federal role in transportation policy since the nation's formation in 1789. The following sections provide a historical perspective on contemporary federalism issues in surface transportation policy, focusing on efforts to devolve programmatic responsibility to states, change state maintenance-of-effort requirements, and alter federal reimbursement matching rates.

The Federal Government's Role in Surface Transportation Policy: 1789-1956

When the nation was formed in 1789, there was considerable debate concerning whether Congress had constitutional authority to provide direct, cash assistance for surface transportation projects. That uncertainty created a conceptual framework that initially limited congressional options for federal involvement in surface transportation policy. Over time, that conceptual framework has evolved in response to changes in American society and in the American political system. Today, the federal government has a prominent role in surface transportation policy, providing about \$52 billion annually for highway and mass transit grants, including \$41.8 billion for highways and \$10.2 billion for mass transit.¹⁶ This spending represents about one-quarter of total government expenditures on highways and mass transit and nearly half (45%) of government highway and mass transit capital expenditures.¹⁷

The following section examines the evolution of the federal role in surface transportation policy since the nation's formation in 1789 to 1956, the year the Federal-Aid to Highway Act of 1956, which authorized the interstate highway system's construction, was adopted. The discussion focuses on key provisions, and arguments presented, affecting federalism issues in surface transportation policy in selected Federal-Aid to Highway Acts, starting with The Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916.

Constitutional Limits on Congressional Options

Article 1, Section 8 of the U.S. Constitution provides Congress authority "To establish Post Offices and post Roads."¹⁸ When the Constitution was ratified in 1789, the prevailing view was that because other types of transportation projects were not listed in the Constitution that they were excluded purposively, suggesting that other transportation projects were either meant to be a state or local government responsibility, or outside the scope of governmental authority

¹⁶ See CRS Report R40805, *Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and Related Agencies (THUD): FY2010 Appropriations*, by David Randall Peterman and Maggie McCarty.

¹⁷ U.S. Department of Transportation, Research and Innovative Technology Administration, Bureau of Transportation Statistics, *National Transportation Statistics*, Washington, DC, June 2009, Table 3-29a, http://www.bts.gov/publications/national_transportation_statistics/html/table_03_29a.html; U.S. Congressional Budget Office and Joint Committee on Taxation, *Subsidizing Infrastructure Investment with Tax-Preferred Bonds*, Washington, DC, October 2009, p. 2, <http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/106xx/doc10667/10-26-TaxPreferredBonds.pdf>; and Peter Orszag, Director, Congressional Budget Office, "Testimony, Current and Future Investment in Infrastructure," before the Committee on the Budget and the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, U.S. House of Representatives, May 8, 2008, p. 4, http://www.cbo.gov/ftpdocs/91xx/doc9136/05-07-Infrastructure_Testimony.pdf.

¹⁸ Constitution of the United States, text available on the National Archives website: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html.

altogether. Nevertheless, during the 1800s there were congressional efforts, primarily from representatives from western states, to adopt legislation to provide federal cash assistance for various types of transportation projects other than post roads to encourage western migration and promote interstate commerce. Most of these efforts failed, primarily due to sectional divisions within the Congress which, at that time, made it difficult to build coalitions large enough to adopt programs that targeted most of its assistance to western states, opposition from Members of Congress who viewed reducing the national debt as a higher priority, and opposition from Members who viewed the provision of cash assistance for transportation projects, other than for post roads, a violation of states' rights, as articulated in the Tenth Amendment: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people."¹⁹

During the 1800s, instead of authorizing cash assistance to states for internal improvements, Congress typically authorized federal land grants to states. The federal land was subsequently auctioned to raise money for internal improvements. For example, in 1823 Ohio received a federal land grant of 60,000 acres along the Maumee Road to raise revenue to improve that road. In 1827, Ohio received another federal land grant of 31,596 acres to raise revenue for the Columbus and Sandusky Turnpike.²⁰

In 1841, nine states (Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Alabama, Missouri, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Michigan), and, with three exceptions, all subsequent newly admitted states were designated land grant states and guaranteed at least 500,000 acres of federal land to be auctioned to support transportation projects, including roads, railroads, bridges, canals and improvement of water courses, that expedited the transportation of the United States mail and military personnel and munitions.²¹ By 1900, over 3.2 million acres of federal land was donated to these states to support wagon road construction. Congress also authorized the donation of another 4.5 million acres of federal land to Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio and Wisconsin to raise revenue for canal construction and 2.225 million acres to Alabama, Iowa and Wisconsin to improve river navigation. In addition, states were provided 37.8 million acres for railroad improvements and 64 million acres for flood control.²² States were provided wide latitude in project selection and federal oversight and administrative regulations were minimal.

¹⁹ Constitution of the United States, text available on the National Archives website: http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html.

²⁰ Thomas Aquinas Burke, "Ohio Lands – A Short History," 8th Edition, (Columbus: Ohio: State Auditor's Office, September 1996), <http://freepages.history.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~maggie/ohio-lands/oh15.html#WROTLNDS>.

²¹ Benjamin Horace Hibbard, *A History of the Public Land Policies* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1924), pp. 228-233. Note: Maine and West Virginia were not eligible for the guarantee because they were formed out of other states and Texas was ineligible because it was considered a sovereign nation when admitted to the Union. Also, five states, Wisconsin, Alabama, Iowa, Nevada and Oregon, subsequently were permitted to use their proceeds from federal land sales solely for public education.

²² Matthias Nordberg Orfield, *Federal Land Grants to the States With Special Reference to Minnesota* (Minneapolis, MN: Bulletin of the University of Minnesota, 1915), pp. 77- 111, 115-118; Morton Grodzins, *The American System* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1966), p. 35; Gary M. Anderson and Dolores T. Martin, "The Public Domain and Nineteenth Century Transfer Policy," *Cato Journal* 6:3 (Winter 1987): 908-910; John Bell Rae, "Federal Land Grants in Aid of Canals," *The Journal of Economic History* 4:2 (November 1944): 167, 168, and U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, *America's Highways, 1776/1976* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1976), 24. Note: 26 states received federal land grants during the 1800s.

Balancing Constitutional Concerns and Constituent Interests: The Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916

Congressional interest in providing federal cash assistance for surface transportation increased during the early 1900s, primarily due to the lobbying efforts of the “Good Roads” movement, initially started by bicycle enthusiasts, that gained momentum as automobile ownership in the United States increased rapidly, from 8,000 registered motor vehicles in 1900 to over 2 million by 1915. Often finding themselves stuck in the mud, the public’s demand for improved roads intensified. Although most of the lobbying for public investment in roads was directed at state and local government officials, several organizations, including the American Automobile Association, formed in 1902, the National Grange, which advocated public investment in farm-to-market roads, and the American Association of State Highway Officials (AASHO, renamed the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials, AASHTO, in 1973) lobbied Congress for federal road assistance.²³ In 1912, their efforts led to the establishment of the Joint Committee on Federal Aid in the Construction of Post Roads, chaired by Senator Jonathan Bourne, Jr., to consider proposals to expand federal assistance for post roads.

The Joint Committee’s final report, issued on November 25, 1914, did not recommend specific legislation. However, it created the groundwork for the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916, named by the now defunct U.S Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) as the federal government’s most significant intergovernmental grant program enacted prior to the New Deal era.²⁴

The Joint Committee argued that federal assistance for post roads was constitutional because “federal aid to good roads will accomplish several of the objectives indicated by the Framers of the Constitution – establish post roads, regulate commerce, provide for the common defense, and promote the general welfare. Above all, it will promote the general welfare.”²⁵ It also argued that federal assistance for paved post roads would generate significant economic benefits for the nation, as much as \$504 million annually in reduced freight hauling costs alone, given the emergence of the “auto truck” for hauling freight short distances.²⁶

The Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916 authorized \$75 million over five years to improve rural, post roads. Funding was prohibited in communities with populations over 2,500 and was offered to states on a 50-50 cost matching basis. Funding was limited to post roads to avoid constitutional challenges based on the Tenth Amendment’s language concerning powers reserved to states. State officials did not object to this federal intrusion into what was then considered one of their domestic policy areas because the program was voluntary and funds were directed to rural areas. At that time, state apportionment rules allocated most state legislative seats to representatives from rural areas. Also, many farmers used rural, post roads to get their produce to market. It was

²³ John B. Rae, *The Road and Car in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 33-39, 49; and Robert Jay Dilger, “Moving the Nation: Governors and the Development of American Transportation Policy,” in *A Legacy of Innovation: Governors and Public Policy*, ed. Ethan G. Sribnick (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 172.

²⁴ U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design*, A-52 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), p. 16.

²⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Roads, *Federal Aid to Good Roads: Report of the Joint Committee on Federal Aid in the Construction of Post Roads*, 63rd Cong., 3rd sess., November 25, 1914 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1915), p. 14.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17.

politically difficult at that time for state politicians to object to a federal subsidy for agriculture when most constituents were farmers.²⁷

Balancing States Rights, Interstate Commerce Powers, and Constituent Interests: The Federal Highway Act of 1921

Constituent demand for public investment in roads and highways continued to expand as automobile ownership increased across the nation. Motor vehicle registrations reached 10.4 million in 1921. AAA and AASHO lobbied for expanded federal assistance for road construction, but recommended that the increased funding be used in different ways. During the reauthorization of the Federal Aid Road Act of 1916 Congress faced the same fundamental question in 1921 that it faces today: what role should the federal government have in surface transportation policy?

At that time, AAA advocated the creation of a federal highway commission to design and oversee the construction of a proposed 50,000-mile federal highway system.²⁸ AASHO advocated the continuation of the reliance on states to design and oversee program operations and the use of the grant device to supplement state road development. AASHO argued that state officials were better positioned than federal bureaucrats to make project selection decisions, having superior knowledge of “its populations and its valuations, and a lot of intricate and small things that a commission here in Washington can not know.”²⁹ Importantly, AASHO also advocated an expansion of grants-in-aid eligibility to roads “divided into two classes, primary or interstate roads and secondary or intercounty roads.”³⁰ AASHO argued that its plan had elements similar to a federal highway system while, at the same time, “takes care of the immediate needs of the largest number of rural communities, recognizing the fact that fully half of the wealth of this country is rural and the modern means of transportation, the automobile and truck, are half in the possession of the farmer.”³¹

In an historic decision that continues to influence congressional debate today, Congress adopted AASHO’s state-centered approach in the Federal Highway Act of 1921. The act left project selection in the hands of state officials and rejected the idea of creating a direct spending program for surface transportation projects. Congress rejected AAA’s federal-centered approach primarily because the use of the grant device was believed to be the best means to avoid constitutional objections that could be raised in the direct provision of domestic services. Because grants are voluntary, it was generally believed that state and local government officials were much less likely to challenge the legality of a federal grant program than a federal direct spending program.³²

²⁷ “Postwar Highway Program,” in *Congress and the Nation, 1945-1964* (Washington, DC: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1965), pp. 525-527.

²⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, *Interstate Highway System*, Hearing on S. 1355, 77th Cong., 1st sess., May 13, 1921 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1921), pp. 76-97; and U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, *Interstate Highway System*, Hearing on S. 1355, 77th Cong., 1st sess., June 2, 1921 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1921), pp. 536-540.

²⁹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, *Interstate Highway System*, Hearing on S. 1355, 77th Cong., 1st sess., May 19, 1921 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1921), p. 181.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

³² U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR), *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design*, A- (continued...)

Congress also increased federal funding to \$75 million annually, maintained the 50-50 cost matching basis, and expanded grants-in-aid eligibility to non-post roads. In recognition of constitutional concerns, eligibility was limited to a Primary System of federal-aid highways, not to exceed 7% of all roads in the state. At least three-sevenths of this system had to consist of roads that were interstate in character. Up to 60% of federal-aid funds could be used on interstate routes. By retaining the federal-aid concept, the act appeased advocates of rural, farm-to-market roads. State highway agencies could be counted on to consider local concerns when deciding the mix of projects.³³

Congress also established in the Federal Highway Act of 1921 that constitutional concerns about states rights still constrained program eligibility, but that congressional authority to regulate interstate commerce and promote the general welfare also had a role in determining program eligibility. As in the past, the prevailing view was that post roads were eligible for federal assistance because they were mentioned as a federal responsibility in the Constitution. Now, the prevailing view was that highways that were interstate in character and expedited the completion of an “adequate and connected system of highways” were also eligible for federal assistance because of their connection to Congressional authority to regulate interstate commerce and promote the general welfare.³⁴ Indicative of the expansion of the program’s scope, the program’s title was changed from the Federal-Aid Road Act to the Federal Highway Act.

Expanding the Federal Role: The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944

During subsequent reauthorizations of the Federal Highway Act AASHO and the American Municipal Association and its constituent state leagues of municipalities lobbied Congress to increase federal funding and to expand program eligibility to include secondary and urban highways.³⁵ They argued that all roads were interconnected, forming a single national surface transportation system. In their view, if any portion of that system was in disrepair or lacked sufficient capacity to carry traffic, then the entire national surface transportation system was affected adversely. As Frederick MacMillin, then-executive secretary of the League of Wisconsin Municipalities, testified before the House Committee on Roads in 1944, “while rural highways may not be all that is desired, it is generally conceded now that urban links have become the bottleneck in our highway system.”³⁶ They also argued that Congress should add urban road construction to the program because urban motorists contributed more in federal gasoline and automotive-related excise taxes than they received in funding.

(...continued)

52 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), pp. 51, 52.

³³ Richard F. Weingroff, “The Federal-State Partnership at Work,” *Public Roads* 60:1 (Summer 1996): 7, <http://www.tfhr.gov/pubrds/summer96/p96su7.htm>.

³⁴ John B. Rae, *The Road and Car in American Life* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 36-39; and Bruce E. Seely, *Building the American Highway System: Engineers as Policy Makers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), pp. 72-80.

³⁵ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Roads, *Federal-Aid Road Act, Summary of Hearings on H.R. 2426, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1944* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1944), pp. 3-6; and Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989, Revised Edition* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 22-28.

³⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Roads, *Federal-Aid Road Act, Summary of Hearings on H.R. 2426, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., 1944* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1944), pp. 4-6.

Trucking organizations opposed the expansion of program eligibility to secondary and urban highways because they worried that expanding the Federal-Aid system might result in higher gasoline taxes and fees. Farm organizations also opposed the expansion of program eligibility because they worried that expanding the system might result in less money for farm-to-market roads.³⁷

At that time, traffic congestion was not the nation's most pressing issue. Millions of Americans were overseas fighting in War World War II, mandatory gasoline rationing was in place, and civilian automobile production had been halted in 1942 to allow automotive assembly plants to be converted to producing war materials. Nevertheless, there were more than 30 million registered motor vehicles on the nation's roads, and federal, state, and local government officials knew that traffic congestion, especially in and around the nation's largest cities, would be a salient political issue for elected officials at all levels of government once the War was over. Most highway-related organizations, led by AAA, supported the creation of an interstate system of highways, similar to those already present in several European countries, to relieve traffic congestion. The idea of creating an interstate system in the United States had been discussed for several years. For example, Thomas H. MacDonald, Chief of the U.S. Bureau of Public Works, advocated the construction of a special system of direct interregional highways in 1939.³⁸ However, there was no consensus on how to finance it. For example, the National Governors Conference (now the National Governors Association) opposed the use of the federal gasoline taxes to fund interstate highways as an infringement on their sovereign taxing powers.

Although lobby organizations were divided on whether the highway program's scope should be expanded to include secondary and urban highways, Congress was aware that national demographic shifts in the nation had heightened the political relevance of urban areas, as Americans increasingly left rural America in search of employment in the nation's cities, and later its suburbs. At the beginning of the century, about 40% of the U.S. population lived in metropolitan areas. By the time the twentieth century ended, that figure had doubled to about 80%. As a result of the on-going transformation of the nation from a primarily rural nation to an urban one, both major political parties sought political advantage in gaining a political foothold in urban America. Funding urban highways was one of the avenues Congress chose to achieve that goal.

The three-year, \$1.5 billion Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 expanded federal surface transportation funding eligibility by adding three new programs to the existing Federal-Aid Highway Primary System: a Federal-Aid Highway Secondary System, comprised of principal secondary and feeder routes, including farm-to-market roads, rural mail and public school bus routes, local rural roads, and county and township roads, either outside of municipalities or inside of municipalities of less than 5,000 population; urban extensions of the Federal-Aid Highway Primary System in municipalities and other urban places having a population of 5,000 or more; and an interstate highway network, not to exceed 40,000 miles, to be called the National System of Interstate Highways.³⁹

³⁷ Ibid.; and Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989, Revised Edition* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 22-28.

³⁸ Richard F. Weingroff, "The Genie In The Bottle: The Interstate System and Urban Problems, 1939-1957," *Public Roads* 64:2 (September/October 2000), <http://www.tfhrc.gov/pubrds/septoct00/urban.htm>.

³⁹ U.S. Congress, House Committee of Conference, *Federal Highway Act of 1944*, Conference Report to Accompany S. 2105, 78th Cong., 2nd sess., December 11, 1944, pp. 2, 3.

The Primary System was authorized at \$225 million annually, the Secondary System at \$150 million annually, and the urban extension program at \$125 million annually, all on a 50-50 cost matching basis. Routes for the National System of Interstate Highways were designated the following year, but budgetary pressures related to World War II precluded the expenditure of more than token amounts for the interstate system's construction.

One of the more significant effects of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1944 on federalism relationships in surface transportation policy was Congress's abandonment of constitutional constraints on program eligibility. Congressional Members and hearing witnesses no longer mentioned states rights as a factor limiting congressional options to the funding of post roads and roads with direct influence on interstate commerce. Now, states, through AASHO and, to an increased extent following the adoption of the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, the National Governors Association, were actively lobbying Congress for increased federal assistance. The congressional focus was on determining the best means to expedite traffic flow and promote economic prosperity, within the constraints of available federal resources and a federalism framework. The result was the expansion of program eligibility, with each of the new programs focused on the needs of specific constituencies. The Primary System focused on projects that addressed county transportation needs. The Secondary System focused on projects that addressed rural America's transportation needs. The urban highway extension program focused on projects that addressed urban America's transportation needs. The Interstate Highway System, given its expansive scope, addressed transportation needs throughout the nation.

The Interstate Highway System Redefines Federalism Relationships in Surface Transportation Policy: The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956

The \$25 billion, 13-year Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 authorized the construction of the then-41,000 mile National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, with a 1972 target completion date. For the next thirty-five years, federal surface transportation policy focused on the completion of the interstate system.

Financing the interstate system had been a key sticking point for many years. Motorist and trucking organizations opposed tolls to finance the system. Governors and highway-related organizations, including AAA, opposed raising federal fuel taxes to finance the system. A special panel formed by the Eisenhower Administration in 1954, the Advisory Committee on a National Highway Program, recommended that thirty-year bonds, financed by federal fuel taxes, be used to finance the system. However, that proposal failed to achieve congressional approval, primarily because Senator Harry Byrd, Chair of the Senate Committee on Finance, wanted a pay-as-you-go financing system that avoided interest charges. The funding impasse was resolved by The Highway Revenue Act of 1956, which created the Highway Trust Fund to finance the system. A relatively small increase in the federal gasoline tax, from two to three cents per gallon, appeased governors and AAA. Governors continued to oppose the federal fuel tax on principle, but recognized that using federal fuel taxes to fund interstate highways was the only viable political option available. One factor contributing to their support was that all Highway Trust Fund revenue was dedicated to highways. In the past, one-third to one-half of federal gasoline revenue had been diverted to other uses. Providing a 90% reimbursement for interstate system expenses

also played a role in attracting gubernatorial support. Prohibiting tolls on interstate highways, with an exception for the 2,447 miles of toll roads already in operation, appeased motorist and trucking organizations.⁴⁰

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 was a defining moment in surface transportation policy because it expanded and solidified the federal government's role in shaping the nation's transportation system. The act elevated the role of federal and state highway department officials in determining the scope and nature of the nation's highway system. Local government officials and urban planners still had a role, but the overall design and location of the interstate system, and increasingly, of primary and secondary highways, were decided by federal and state officials whose goals of promoting national economic growth and expediting traffic flow sometimes conflicted with those held by local government officials who were also interested in clearing slums and other blighted areas, and promoting local economic development. In addition, federal and state highway engineers imposed professional, uniform road construction and design standards throughout the nation. Some local government officials resented the imposition of these standards because they increased construction costs and impinged on their autonomy.⁴¹

The Federal Government's Role in Surface Transportation Policy: 1956-1991

From 1956 to 1991, state and local government officials focused their efforts in surface transportation policy on maximizing the provision of federal assistance and minimizing federal involvement in how they used federal funds. Specifically, they opposed efforts to increase federal fuel taxes to pay for the increasing cost to complete the interstate highway system on the grounds that any such increases infringed on their sovereign authority to tax fuel by making it more difficult for them to raise state fuel taxes. They also opposed efforts to divert federal Highway Trust Fund revenue to other uses, including mass transit and deficit reduction; and opposed the proliferation of intergovernmental crossover sanctions requiring states to take specific actions, such as limiting highway speeds, removing certain highway billboards, and imposing uniform alcohol standards for determining drunk driving, or lose a portion of federal highway assistance. States also supported efforts to increase federal surface transportation funding levels and to increase the federal share of non-interstate highway expenses.

Debating Reimbursement Rates: The Federal-Aid to Highway Acts of 1970 and 1978

When the Federal-Aid Road Act of 1916 was debated, there was a general consensus that the federal reimbursement rate for expenses would be set at 50%. At that time, a 50-50 cost sharing arrangement was viewed as "an equitable apportionment of burdens, an automatic check upon the demands from the States for Federal appropriation, insures the accomplishment of tangible

⁴⁰ Robert Jay Dilger, "Moving the Nation: Governors and the Development of American Transportation Policy," in *A Legacy of Innovation: Governors and Public Policy*, ed. Ethan G. Sribnick (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), p. 177.

⁴¹ Mark H. Rose, *Interstate: Express Highway Politics, 1939-1989, Revised Edition* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1990), pp. 95-104.

results, and affords a sound basis for the exercise by the Federal officials of the most searching scrutiny and a conservative policy of approval.”⁴²

As the federal intergovernmental grants-in-aid system matured, and federal cost sharing requirements became more varied both across and within policy areas, academics, stakeholders, and policymakers became increasingly interested in the impact federal cost sharing requirements had on state and local government budgetary behavior. Critics of federal grants with state or local government cost sharing requirements (particularly federal grants that had a 50% or higher state and local government cost sharing requirement) argued that cost sharing requirements distort state and local government budgetary decisions in favor of the federally assisted activity. In their view, because state and local government officials are better positioned than federal bureaucrats to identify and respond to state and local government needs, the distortion of state and local government decision-making resulting from the imposition of cost matching requirements led to the non-optimal use of public funds. They argued that lowering state cost matching requirements, or eliminating them altogether, would result in less distortion of state and local government budgetary decisions and would maximize the public interest. Others argued that providing federal funds with very low or no cost matching requirements may lure state and local governments into programmatic activities that they could not afford if the federal assistance was later withdrawn, or could result in spending on projects that never could have stood on their own merits. Still others argued that the imposition of state and local government cost sharing requirements are an appropriate means to stimulate state and local government spending in areas deemed to be in the national interest. In their view, federal cost sharing requirements should be proportional to the extent to which the aided activity aligns with an identified national interest. In academic terms, “the danger of distortion and waste of resources occurs when the cost-sharing requirement is more generous to the recipient government than is justified by the degree of spillover or national interest characterizing the aided state or local government activity.”⁴³

In 1970, several organizations, including AASHO and the American Road Builders Association, joined state and local governments in advocating an increase in the federal share of expenses for non-interstate highways. They argued that increased highway maintenance costs and “increasing requirements for non-Federally aided state highway improvements” were making it more difficult for states to meet the federal government’s 50% matching requirement for non-interstate highways.⁴⁴ Representatives of the National League of Cities and U.S. Conference of Mayors argued that the focus on interstate highway construction had led the nation to neglect urban highway systems and that the cost of improving urban highways had increased dramatically, justifying an increase in the reimbursement rate for non-interstate highways.⁴⁵ The National Association of Counties argued that because the interstate system was nearing completion that Congress should focus additional resources on non-interstate highways and increase the federal share of expenses to 70% for any additions to the interstate system and for all other federally aided highways. In their view, increasing the reimbursement rate to 70% was justified because

⁴² U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Post Offices and Post Roads, *Federal Aid in the Construction of Rural Post Roads*, Report to accompany H.R. 7617, 64th Cong., 1st sess., March 10, 1916 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1916), p. 21.

⁴³ ACIR, *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design*, A-52 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), p. 176.

⁴⁴ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Roads, Statement of Burton F. Miller, Executive Vice President, American Road Builders’ Association, *Federal Highway Act of 1970, Part 3*, hearing on S. 4055 and S. 4260, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., September 9, 1970 (Washington: GPO, 1970), p. 1224.

⁴⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Roads, *Federal Highway Act of 1970 and Miscellaneous Bills, Part 2*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., July 14 and 15, 1970 (Washington: GPO, 1970), pp. 603-608.

“many States and most local governments are finding it increasingly difficult to come up with 50 percent matching funds.”⁴⁶ Congress subsequently increased the federal share of expenses for non-interstate highways from 50% to 70% in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1970.

In 1978, states advocated another increase in the federal share of expenses for non-interstate highways, arguing that rising gasoline prices had led motorists to drive less and, coupled with improvements in automotive fuel economy, had caused state fuel tax revenue to fall, making it more difficult for them to find state funds to meet their 30% share of expenses. The National Association of Counties argued that some local governments were also having difficulty participating in the program because of the required matching rate.⁴⁷ Secretary of Transportation Brock Adams indicated that the Carter Administration also supported an increase in the federal share of expenses for non-interstate highways, arguing that “we find about 70 percent is a breaking point, the States are simply unable to raise sufficient money to match Federal moneys and then the program languishes.... we would like to establish uniformity in percentages of grants, whether it is 75-25 or 80-20.”⁴⁸ Congress subsequently increased the federal share of expenses for non-interstate highways from 70% to 75% in the Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1978.⁴⁹

The following sections discuss several efforts during this time period to “sort out” or devolve federal surface transportation programs to state and local governments. This discussion is pertinent given recent proposals to sort out federal-state responsibilities in surface transportation policy.

Efforts to “Sort-out” Governmental Responsibilities in Surface Transportation Policy: Presidents Nixon’s and Reagan’s New Federalism Proposals

During the 1960s and 1970s, the number of federal grants to state and local governments, including those provided for surface transportation, increased dramatically. The total number of federal grants to state and local governments increased from 132 in 1960 to 387 in 1968, the year before President Richard Nixon became President, and to 539 in 1981, when President Ronald Reagan became President.⁵⁰

The number of federal surface transportation grant programs funded by the Federal-Aid to Highway Act also increased. There were nine surface transportation programs in the Federal Highway Act of 1960: forest development roads and trails, forest highways, Indian Reservation

⁴⁶ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Roads, *Federal Highway Act of 1970 and Miscellaneous Bills, Part 1*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., July 13 1970 (Washington: GPO, 1970), p. 512.

⁴⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Transportation, Statement of Milton Johnson, on behalf of the National Association of Counties, *Federal Aid Highway Act of 1978*, hearing on Federal Aid Highway Act of 1978, 95th Cong., 1st sess., July 26, 1977 (Washington: GPO, 1977), p. 121.

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, Subcommittee on Transportation, Statement of Brock Adams, Secretary of Transportation, *Federal Aid Highway Act of 1978*, hearing on Federal Aid Highway Act of 1978, 95th Cong., 1st sess., July 26, 1977 (Washington: GPO, 1977), p. 67.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 178-181.

⁵⁰ Robert Jay Dilger, “The Expansion and Centralization of American Governmental Functions,” in *American Intergovernmental Relations Today: Perspectives and Controversies*, ed. Robert Jay Dilger (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1986), p. 18.

Roads and Bridges, Park Roads and Trails, Parkway, Public Land Highways, Federal Aid Primary System, Federal Aid Secondary System and Federal-Aid Primary and Secondary Systems Extensions in Urban Areas.⁵¹ In 1975, there were 37 programs: Interstate Highway System; Federal-Aid Highway Primary System in Rural Areas; Federal-Aid Secondary System in Rural Areas; Federal-Aid Urban Systems; Federal-Aid Primary and Secondary Systems Extensions in Urban Areas; Emergency Relief; Forest Highways; Priority Primary Routes; Special Urban High Density Traffic Program; Motor Vehicle Diagnostic Inspection Demonstration Projects; Off-System Road Projects; Railroad Safety; Carpool Demonstration Projects in Urban Areas; Surveys, Planning, Research and Development for Highway Programs; Public Land Highways; three grant programs for Highway Beautification; Education and Training Program for Highway Personnel; four grant programs for urban mass transportation; Transportation Planning in Urban Areas; Urban Area Traffic Operations Improvements; Bridges on Federal Dams; Economic Growth Center Development Highways; and ten grant programs for highway safety.⁵²

During the 1970s and 1980s, there were several attempts to change federal, state, and local government roles in surface transportation policy. Presidents Nixon's and Reagan's efforts are particularly noteworthy as both were convinced that federal grants to state and local governments had become duplicative and wasteful, and both attempted to sort out the appropriate roles and responsibilities of each level of government in several programmatic areas, including surface transportation policy.⁵³ For example, in his 1971 State of the Union speech, President Nixon announced a plan to focus federal resources on areas of national interest by consolidating 129 federal grant programs in six functional areas, 33 in education, 26 in transportation, 12 in urban community development, 17 in manpower training, 39 in rural community development, and 2 in law enforcement, into six special revenue sharing programs. Unlike the categorical grants they would replace, the proposed special revenue sharing programs had no state matching requirements, relatively few auditing or oversight requirements, and the funds were distributed automatically without prior federal approval of plans for their use.⁵⁴

President Nixon's proposal to consolidate 26 federal surface transportation programs into a special revenue sharing program failed to gain congressional approval, primarily because it generated opposition from interest groups affiliated with highway construction who worried that the programs' future funding would be compromised, and from state highway officials worried about losing programmatic influence to governors.⁵⁵ Nonetheless, President Nixon and his successor, President Gerald Ford, continued to oppose further expansion in the number of federal surface transportation programs and those numbers remained fairly stable for the remainder of the decade. When President Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981, there were 34 federal surface transportation programs funded by the Federal-Aid Highway Act, compared to 37 in 1975.⁵⁶

⁵¹ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Public Works, Subcommittee on Public Roads, *Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1960*, hearing on H.R. 10495, 86th Cong., 2nd sess., June 9, 1960 (Washington: GPO, 1960), p. 2.

⁵² ACIR, *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design*, A-52 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), pp. 118, 129; and ACIR, *A Catalog of Federal Grant-In-Aid Programs to State and Local Governments: Grants Funded FY 1975*, A-52A (Washington, DC: GPO, 1977), pp. 13-15.

⁵³ Claude E. Barfield, *Rethinking Federalism: Block Grants and Federal, State, and Local Responsibilities* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1981), p. 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Timothy Conlan, *New Federalism: Intergovernmental Reform From Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1988), pp. 36-38.

⁵⁶ ACIR, *A Catalog of Federal Grant-In-Aid Programs to State and Local Governments: Grants Funded FY 1981*, M- (continued...)

President Reagan also wanted to change federal and state roles in surface transportation policy. In 1982, he proposed a \$20 billion “swap” in which the federal government would return to states full responsibility for funding Aid to Families With Dependent Children (AFDC) (now Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) and food stamps in exchange for federal assumption of state contributions for Medicaid. He also proposed a temporary \$28 billion trust fund or “super revenue sharing program” to replace 43 other grant programs, including all non-interstate highways, Appalachian highways and urban mass transit construction and operating grants. The trust fund, and federal taxes supporting it, would begin phasing out after four years leaving states the option of replacing federal tax support with their own funds to continue the programs or allowing the programs to expire.

Both the swap proposal and the proposed devolution of 43 federal programs failed to gain congressional approval. Both proposals were opposed by organizations who feared that if enacted, they would result in less funding for the affected programs. For example, the National Governors Association supported the federal take over of Medicaid, but objected to assuming the costs for AFDC and food stamps. The economy was weakening at that time and governors worried that they would not have the fiscal capacity necessary to support the programs without continued federal assistance.⁵⁷

President Reagan’s Surface Transportation Block Grant Proposals and Opposition to Highway “Demonstration Projects”

In 1983, President Reagan proposed the Federalism Block Grant Highway Act of 1983. It would have provided states the choice of continuing to receive funds for highway programs focused on local and state needs (Urban System, Secondary System, bridges other than Primary and high-cost bridges, highway safety, hazard elimination and rail-highway crossings) under existing statutory mechanisms or receiving them in the form of a block grant. The federal role in highway programs that focused on “the federal interest” (primary and interstate highways and bridges, as well as high-cost bridges) was to be continued.⁵⁸ In 1986, he proposed the Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act of 1986, which would have combined the Primary, Interstate reconstruction and Interstate construction programs into a single program. It would have also created a block grant for the remaining highway programs and mass transit. Neither proposal was approved by Congress.⁵⁹

In 1987, President Reagan vetoed the Surface Transportation and Uniform Relocation Assistance Act of 1987 (STURAA), the last surface transportation authorization bill of the Interstate era. In the first, and only, veto of a federal-aid highway bill in the 20th Century, President Reagan cited several objections to the bill, but was especially critical of the bill’s 121 “demonstration projects” which he considered wasteful. Members of Congress who wanted funds for a project in their state

(...continued)

133 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1982), pp. 26-28.

⁵⁷ Timothy J. Conlan and David B. Walker, “Reagan’s New Federalism: Design, Debate and Discord,” *Intergovernmental Perspective* 8:4 (Winter 1983): 6-15, 18-22; and Timothy Conlan, *New Federalism: Intergovernmental Reform From Nixon to Reagan* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1988), pp. 182-198.

⁵⁸ Elizabeth Parker, Major Proposals to Restructure the Highway Program,” *Transportation Quarterly*, 45:1 (January 1991): 55-66, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/restructure.htm>.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

had adopted the practice of inventing a concept it would “demonstrate” indicating that it was part of an important research initiative. Using this idea, for example, funding for two parking lots became a demonstration of “methods of facilitating the transfer of passengers between different modes of transportation.”⁶⁰ Congress initially sustained President Reagan’s veto by a single vote in the Senate on April 1, 1987, but the following day one of the Senators who had voted to sustain the veto switched his vote, and the veto was overridden.⁶¹

The inclusion of demonstration projects in STURAA, and the inclusion of increasing numbers of congressionally earmarked projects in subsequent reauthorizations have implications for federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. Although many Members of Congress discuss their surface transportation earmarks with their state and local government officials prior to making their requests for an earmark, earmarks, by definition, reduce state and local government flexibility. The extent of congressional earmarks’ impact on state and local government flexibility is related to how the earmarks are treated in the distribution of the program’s funds. For example, congressional earmarks in SAFETEA’s National Corridor Infrastructure Improvement Program (\$1.9 billion), Projects of National and Regional Significance (\$1.8 billion), Transportation Improvements (\$2.5 billion), as well as discretionary programs earmarked during the annual appropriations process are all outside the scope of SAFETEA’s Equity Bonus (EB) program. The EB program is designed to guarantee each state at least a 92% return on payments to the Highway Account in the Highway Trust Fund for those programs listed in the EB program (which includes all of the core formula programs as well as several other programs).⁶² Because these earmarks are outside of the EB program’s scope, they have no direct impact on the calculations that determine the distribution of the EB program’s funds to states. As a result, although states have little discretion concerning how those earmarked funds are to be spent, the funds are considered additional funding, often referred to as being “above the line.”

On the other hand, SAFETEA’s High Priority Project (HPP) earmarks (nearly \$15 billion) are included within the scope of SAFETEA’s EB program, often referred to as being “below the line.” As a result, these earmarks are counted in the calculations that determine the distribution of the EB program’s funds to states, reducing the amount that each state receives through the EB program. Because EB program funding is distributed to states through the program’s core formula programs, states receiving HPP earmarks not only have little discretion concerning how those earmarked funds are to be spent, but also experience a reduction in the amount of formula program funds that they would otherwise receive and rely on to implement their state transportation improvement plans. The issue is whether congressional earmarks, if continued, should be inside or outside the scope of the EB program. Keeping congressional earmarks

⁶⁰ Richard F. Weingroff, “President Ronald Reagan and the Surface Transportation and Uniform Relocation Assistance Act of 1987,” U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/rw01e.cfm>.

⁶¹ Ibid. Note: Senator Terry Sanford switched his vote.

⁶² The following programs are included in SAFETEA’s EB program: Interstate Maintenance, National Highway System, Surface Transportation Program, Bridge and Bridge Maintenance, Congestion, Mitigation, and Air Quality, Highway Safety Improvement Program, Recreational Trails, Appalachian Development Highway System, High Priority Projects, Metropolitan Planning, Coordinated Border Infrastructure Program, Safe Routes to School Program, and the Rail-Highway Grade Crossing program. For further analysis, see CRS Report R40451, *The Donor-Donee State Issue: Funding Equity in Surface Transportation Reauthorization*, by Robert S. Kirk; and CRS Report RL33119, *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU or SAFETEA): Selected Major Provisions*, coordinated by John W. Fischer.

outside, as opposed to inside, the EB program would place less of a restraint on state flexibility in regard to the funding received for the core formula programs, but it would also dilute the impact of a rate-of-return guarantee.⁶³

Although President Reagan's New Federalism and block grant proposals were not adopted, he continued to advocate further reductions in the number of surface transportation programs, and had some success. There were 27 federal surface transportation programs funded by the Federal-Aid Highway program at the conclusion of his second term in office, compared to 34 at the outset of his presidency.⁶⁴ Among the programmatic changes that took place during his presidency was a reduction in mass transit operating assistance and a refocused emphasis on capital expenditures.

ACIR: The Geographic Range of Benefits Argument

In 1987, the now defunct U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) recommended that Congress "move toward the goal of repealing all highway and bridge programs that are financed from the federal Highway Trust Fund, except for: (1) the Interstate highway system, (2) the portion of the bridge program that serves the Interstate system, (3) the emergency relief highway program, and (4) the federal lands highway program."⁶⁵ The Commission also recommended that Congress "relinquish an adequate share of the federal excise tax on gasoline" to enable states to finance the devolved programs.⁶⁶

ACIR was one of the first organizations to offer specific criteria for defining areas of national interest and determining roles for federal, state and local government officials in surface transportation policy. ACIR conceded that all roads are physically interconnected. As noted earlier, the highway system's interconnectedness had been used as a rationale for expanding federal program eligibility in surface transportation policy. ACIR argued that while all roads are interconnected, "they differ systematically in the length of trips on them and in the travel purposes for which they are used."⁶⁷ ACIR argued that "most trips on Interstate highways are much longer than trips taken on the Secondary and Urban systems" and that "this fact argues that the Interstate network provides transportation benefits over a wider geographic range than Secondary and Urban systems."⁶⁸ ACIR went on to conclude that "This concept of the geographic range of highway benefits is a key test to determine which unit of government should bear responsibility for highway finance."⁶⁹

ACIR argued that "roads that serve largely local purposes – helping to make quicker trips to the supermarket, for example – compete with financing for roads that provide truly national benefits – for instance, facilitating the interstate commerce and economic health on which the whole

⁶³ For further analysis, see CRS Report R40053, *Surface Transportation Program Reauthorization Issues for the 111th Congress*, coordinated by John W. Fischer.

⁶⁴ ACIR, *Characteristics of Federal Grant-In-Aid Programs to State and Local Governments Funded FY 1991*, M-182 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1992), pp. 24, 28; and ACIR, *Characteristics of Federal Grant-In-Aid Programs to State and Local Governments Funded FY 1981*, M-133 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1982), pp. 26-29.

⁶⁵ ACIR, *Devolving Selected Federal-Aid Highway Programs and Revenue Bases: A Critical Appraisal*, A-108 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1987), p. 2.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

nation's welfare depends."⁷⁰ It recommended that the approximate geographical range of benefits associated with surface transportation programs supported the idea of incremental devolution, where roads that provide virtually no national benefits were devolved first and others that, on balance, provide some national benefits could be devolved later. ACIR noted that incremental devolution was "likely to be more palatable politically than a wrenching, once-and-for-all change."⁷¹

ACIR also introduced the notion of interstate spillovers, or externalities, as an example of the use of the geographic range of benefits criteria. Economists use the term spillover or externality to describe the market imperfection that results when producers and consumers in a market either do not bear all of the costs or do not reap all of the benefits of an economic activity. Wastewater and air pollution treatment are often used as examples where economic spillovers occur. The primary beneficiaries of cleaner water and air often live downstream or downwind from a pollution source, not those who live where the effluent or polluted air is treated. Those living at the source of the pollution have no, or little, incentive to pay for activities that primarily benefit those living downstream or downwind. Economists argue that services with spillover effects are not likely to be provided at optimal levels without some form of government intervention, typically by providing an incentive to the provider to undertake the service at optimal levels or by a mandate to do so.⁷²

ACIR argued that highways, especially interstate highways, are subject to spillovers and the "best government for providing services is one with an appropriately large jurisdiction so that the jurisdiction can encompass the externalities."⁷³ It argued that

an interstate spillover occurs when road benefits are not fully captured in-state, or are not fully captured by taxes and other charges levied by the providing state. The state budgetary process has little reason to value fully out-of-state benefits. An all too logical consequence might be underfinancing of roads with large out-of-state benefits relative to their in-state benefits. For example, by charging tolls on Interstate 80 (which is not currently permitted), Pennsylvania could reap the savings of fuel and time gained by the highway's efficient New York to Chicago routing, with the tolls defraying maintenance costs for efficient transportation. In this case, toll finance could internalize what would otherwise be an interstate spillover, namely the region-wide advantages of a direct, swift, well-maintained superhighway. However, if the hypothetical tolls on Interstate 80 were set too high in relation to the additional cost incurred by additional use (e.g., wear or perhaps the need for extra lanes) motorists would be overcharged. In effect, they would be paying twice, through both tolls and taxes, and the interstate motorist would be exploited.⁷⁴

ACIR also advocated the principle of fiscal equivalence to sort out surface transportation financing. It argued that "Those who benefit from the government function should pay for it" and that jurisdictions that pay for a function and receive its benefits have an incentive to make "judicious fiscal choices, neither skimping on valuable public investment nor squandering other

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² ACIR, *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design*, A-52 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), p. 51.

⁷³ ACIR, *Devolving Selected Federal-Aid Highway Programs and Revenue Bases: A Critical Appraisal*, A-108 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1987), p. 29.

⁷⁴ Ibid., pp. 29, 30.

person's tax dollars."⁷⁵ It went on to argue that "without fiscal equivalence, highway beneficiaries who do not pay their fair share are motivated to exaggerate their demands, if successful they improve their services at the expense of others."⁷⁶

ACIR noted that "over time, considerable national standardization has been developed in the highway transportation system" largely due to the efforts of "transportation officials (notably AASHTO)" and that such standardization "most likely would continue after devolution, even if direct, federal control were limited to the Interstate system."⁷⁷ It argued that the benefits of standardization, such as for safety requirements, "serve both the national and local goals."⁷⁸

Applying these principles, ACIR argued that the "great preponderance of the Interstate System ... merits continued federal support."⁷⁹ However, the "national role of the Primary system has been greatly reduced by the Interstate system," and "with well functioning Interstate and Primary systems, the national benefits of the federal-aid Urban system are contained, by and large, within individual states or metropolitan areas."⁸⁰ Also, "by and large, Secondary highways are even more appropriate for state-local financing and control than the Urban system" because "most Secondary roads are only lightly traveled, because of shifts in population and the presence of alternative routes that are designed to higher standards."⁸¹

ACIR argued that it was "doubtful" that any general principle of fiscal federalism governs the award of funds through demonstration projects" but noted that highway demonstration projects "rarely convey important national benefits."⁸² It also argued that certain bridge safety programs serve a "coordinating as well as an operational safety function that is not appropriate for devolution" but programs to widen bridges to remove traffic bottlenecks may be appropriate for devolution if the bridge's traffic is primarily local in nature.⁸³

The Federal Government's Role in Surface Transportation Policy: The Post-Interstate Era

There have been three reauthorizations of the Federal-Aid Highway Act since 1987, the \$151 billion, six-year, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA, P.L. 102-240) signed by President George H.W. Bush on December 18, 1991, the \$203.4 billion, six-year Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21, P.L. 105-178), signed by President Bill Clinton on June 9, 1998, and the \$286 billion, Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2005: A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA, P.L. 109-59) signed by

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 28.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 30, 31.

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 31.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid., pp. 31, 32.

President George W. Bush on August 10, 2005 and set to expire on September 30, 2009.⁸⁴ The following discussion examines the major federalism issues involved in each of these reauthorizations, focusing on federalism issues that may be discussed during SAFETEA's reauthorization, including efforts to sort out appropriate roles for federal, state, and local governments in surface transportation policy, change state maintenance-of-effort requirements, and alter federal reimbursement rates.

Congress Sets a New Direction for Federalism Relationships in Surface Transportation Policy: ISTEA

Although most lobbying organizations involved in the 1991 reauthorization of the Surface Transportation and Uniform Relocation Assistance Act of 1987 had not changed their positions on federal surface transportation policy, circumstances had changed a great deal. From 1956 to 1991, there had been a shared consensus among policymakers and lobbying organizations that the highway program's primary goal was to build the Interstate System. Now that the Interstate system was, for all practical matters, complete, that consensus no longer existed. During reauthorization, President George H. W. Bush, the House, and Senate advocated fundamentally different approaches to structuring federalism relationships in surface transportation policy.

President George H. W. Bush shared President Reagan's view that the intergovernmental system had become duplicative and wasteful and targeted surface transportation policy as an area in need of reform. On February 13, 1991, he announced a five-year, \$105 billion reauthorization proposal for the Federal-Aid Highway program, called the Surface Transportation Assistance Act (H.R. 1351, S. 610). It included a 40% increase in funding for highways (\$88.5 billion) and a marginal increase for mass transit (\$16.5 billion). His proposal was guided by two fundamental principles, that state and local government officials should have greater influence on project selection and federal financial assistance should reflect the program's geographic range of benefits. In his words, "Our approach will provide States and localities with flexibility to select which highways will receive targeted Federal dollars, and States and localities will be able to choose whether to spend Federal dollars on transit or highway solutions. As never before, we are encouraging creative new financing and management by the States."⁸⁵

Using the geographic range of benefits principle, he recommended that the Interstate, Primary, Secondary and Urban Highway programs be replaced by two programs: a \$43.5 billion, 150,000 mile National Highway System (NHS) consisting of highways with significance for national defense or that carried goods and people across state lines and a \$22.2 billion urban and rural highway block grant for other federally funded roads (about 716,000 miles at that time).⁸⁶ Because the block grant consisted of roads lacking national significance, he recommended that it receive less funding than the proposed national highway system and its reimbursement rate lowered from 75% to 60%. The federal reimbursement rate for highways in the national highway

⁸⁴ Because SAFETEA's enactment took place late in FY2005, it could be argued that a more useful representation of its funding is that it provided \$244 billion in spending authority from FY2005 through FY2009. See CRS Report R41512, *Surface Transportation Program Reauthorization Issues for the 112th Congress*, coordinated by Robert S. Kirk.

⁸⁵ President George H.W. Bush, "Remarks Announcing Proposed Transportation Legislation," *Public Papers of President George H.W. Bush*, February 13, 1991, http://bushlibrary.tamu.edu/research/public_papers.php?id=2703&year=1991&month=2.

⁸⁶ Samuel Skinner, Secretary, Department of Transportation, *Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 – A Summary* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation, 1991), <http://ntl.bts.gov/DOCS/ste.html>.

system would remain the same, 90% for interstate highways and 75% for primary highways. He also recommended that states be allowed to shift funds between urban and rural highways, from urban and rural highways to mass transit and, with the exception for new mass transit starts, from mass transit to urban and rural highways.⁸⁷ Because the President believed that mass transit's benefits accrue primarily within state and metropolitan areas, in addition to proposing that mass transit funding be increased only marginally, to \$16.5 billion over five years, he also recommended that the federal reimbursement rate for mass transit capital expenses be reduced from 80% to 60%, and for new starts from 75% to 50%.

Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Chair of the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works' Subcommittee on Water Resources, Transportation, and Infrastructure, led the Senate's reauthorization effort. The Senate bill took a fundamentally different approach to federalism relationships in surface transportation policy than what was offered by the President.⁸⁸ Senator Moynihan had a close working relationship with the Surface Transportation Project, a coalition of urban, environmental and intermodal transportation advocates, and crafted a bill, S. 965, the Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (later incorporated into S. 1204 with the same title), that would have shifted the focus of federal policy away from highway construction toward maintenance, placed greater emphasis on mass transit and intermodal solutions to traffic congestion, further decentralized programmatic authority to states and metropolitan planning organizations in the project development process, increased public participation in the project development process, and strengthened environmental protections. Specifically, the Senate bill authorized funding at \$123 billion, with almost half of the bill's highway funds (\$44.7 billion) for a Surface Transportation Program, which would allow states to fund a broad range of surface transportation projects, including construction, restoration, and operational improvements for highways and bridges; capital and operating costs for mass transit, rail, and magnetic levitation systems; carpool projects and parking and bicycle facilities and programs; and surface transportation research and development programs. The bill also including \$21 billion for mass transit.⁸⁹

The Senate bill rejected the geographic range of benefits argument in the determination of federal reimbursement rates. Instead of lowering cost matching rates for transportation projects lacking a national interest, the Senate bill would have "leveled the playing field" by setting reimbursement rates at 80% for maintaining and improving transportation facilities, and 75% for new construction. The financial incentive to fund new construction over maintenance was to be eliminated by giving maintenance a higher reimbursement rate than new construction.

The Bush Administration indicated that it could not support S. 965 because it did not include its recommended National Highway System, and did not focus federal resources on highways of national interest. Dr. Thomas Larson, Administrator of the Federal Highway Administration, testified before the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works that "While we are moving to the post-Interstate construction era, we are not yet ready for a post-highway

⁸⁷ Mike Mills, "Administration Asks States to Carry the Transit Load," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, March 9, 1991, pp. 599, 600.

⁸⁸ U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway History, Richard F. Weingroff, "National Highway System: Imagining The Future," <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/nhsorigins.cfm>. Note: Senator Quentin Burdick, Chair, Committee on Environment and Public Works, was in failing health at the time and allowed Senator Moynihan to take the lead.

⁸⁹ S. 965, Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (Introduced in Senate) and S. 1204, Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (Engrossed as Agreed to or Passed by Senate).

transportation economy.”⁹⁰ He added that “50 strong state programs will not necessarily provide a strong national program, and the experience in the European Community and the experience that we’ve had in working with the 50 States in response to the House Public Works [Committee’s] charge that we develop an illustrative national [highway] system suggests that there is a need for Federal oversight of coordination.”⁹¹ To avoid a presidential veto, the Senate bill was amended on the Senate floor to include funding for a National Highway System.

The House bill (H.R. 2950, the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991) took yet another approach to structuring federalism relationships in surface transportation policy, incorporating some elements of the Administration’s proposal and some elements from the Senate bill. It authorized \$151 billion for the program, including \$32 billion for mass transit. It included funding for a National Highway System (up to 155,000 miles, plus or minus 15%, to be designated within two years) and, although it did not go as far as the Senate bill in providing states additional programmatic flexibility, it would have provided states added flexibility to shift funds among existing highway programs, including for mass transit purposes. It accepted Senator Moynihan’s “level playing field argument” and set federal reimbursement rates at 80% for most programs, and 90% to 95% for interstate highways, with the higher reimbursement rate offered to states with relatively large amounts of federal land.

The \$151 billion, six-year, Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act of 1991 (ISTEA, P.L. 102-240), subsequently adopted by Congress, represented a compromise between the House and Senate approaches to federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. ISTEA was authorized at the House level, \$46 billion more than the President had requested, and nearly doubled the amount the Administration requested for mass transit, providing \$119 billion for highways and \$32 billion for mass transit. ISTEA replaced the Interstate, Primary, Secondary and Urban Highway programs with two programs: a \$21 billion, 155,000 mile National Highway System (NHS), including all interstate routes, a large percentage of urban and rural principal arterials, the defense strategic highway network, and strategic highway connectors; and a \$23.9 billion Surface Transportation Program (STP) for all roads not functionally classified as local or rural minor collector. ISTEA retained separate programs and authorizations for Interstate Highways (\$7.2 billion), Interstate Maintenance (\$17 billion), Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation (\$16.1 billion), and created a new, \$6 billion Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement Program.

ISTEA’s impact on federalism relationships in surface transportation policy was particularly noteworthy for several reasons. First, it increased state programmatic authority to shift funds among existing programs, allowing states to shift up to half of their NHS funds to other highway programs and mass transit and up to 100% with the approval of the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Second, ISTEA enhanced the role of Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs) in project selection by requiring states to reserve approximately \$9 billion of STP funds for the use of MPOs representing urban areas with populations of 200,000 or more. Third, ISTEA mandated a new style of performance planning for managing and monitoring highway pavement conditions, bridge maintenance, highway safety programs, traffic congestion mitigation, transit facility and equipment maintenance, and intermodal transportation facilities and systems. In addition, statewide transportation improvement plans, both for the long-term and

⁹⁰ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, *Pending Highway Legislation*, hearing on S. 823 and S. 965, 102nd Cong., 1st sess., May 14, 1991, S. Hrg. 102-142 (Washington: GPO, 1991), p. 339.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 282.

for a shorter-term, were required for the first time, in addition to metropolitan transportation improvement plans that had been required since 1962. Fourth, ISTEA rejected the application of the geographic range of benefits argument in setting reimbursement rates. Instead, it “leveled the playing field” by retaining interstate reimbursement rates at 90% for interstate construction and maintenance (with up to 95% for states with relatively large amounts of federally owned land) and increased reimbursement rates to 80% for most non-interstate highway and mass transit projects. This change removed the financial incentive to fund highways over mass transit, and new construction over maintenance.⁹²

Debating Program Devolution and Continuing the Expansion of State Programmatic Flexibilities: TEA-21

In 1995, there were 633 federal grants-in-aid programs, including 618 categorical grants and 15 block grants.⁹³ There were 30 surface transportation grant programs, 28 categorical grants and 2 block grants. Several prominent members of President Bill Clinton’s Administration, including Alice Rivlin, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, advocated a sorting out of intergovernmental responsibilities to reduce expenses and improve government performance. However, President Bill Clinton proposed more modest intergovernmental reforms. For example, his ISTEA reauthorization proposal, the six-year, \$174.5 billion, National Economic Crossroads Transportation Efficiency Act (NEXTEA, H.R. 1268, S. 468), would have retained and increased funding for virtually all ISTEA programs (providing \$139 billion for highways and \$35.5 billion for mass transit). It also included \$4.7 billion for Amtrak and would have made Amtrak eligible for STP funding.

During ISTEA’s reauthorization, Congress addressed efforts to devolve programmatic authority to states and to expand state authority to “flex” federal funding among existing programs, but it focused most of its attention on resolving differences related to the program’s allocation of resources among states. The STEP 21 Coalition, representing the “donor” states of Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Nebraska, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and Wisconsin, advocated a minimum 95 cents return per dollar their highway users contributed to the Highway Trust Fund. They also wanted to merge the interstate maintenance program and portions of the bridge program into the national highway system and create a Streamlined Surface Transportation Block Grant program which would receive about 60% of the program’s highway funding and could be used for all existing program activities.⁹⁴ The Alliance for ISTEA Renewal (U.S. Conference of Mayors, National Association of Counties, National League of Cities, American Public Transit Association, Association of Metropolitan Planning Organizations and the Surface Transportation Policy Project) wanted to prevent the redirection of federal fuel tax revenue from the Highway Trust Fund, but otherwise recommended relatively minor changes to ISTEA. California, Ohio, South Carolina, and Michigan endorsed

⁹² Mike Mills, “Highway and Transit Overhaul is Cleared for President,” *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, November 30, 1991, pp. 3518-3522; Kirk Victor, “Skinner’s Final Act,” *National Journal*, December 14, 1991, pp. 3016-3019; and Bruce D. McDowell, “Reinventing Surface Transportation: New Intergovernmental Challenges,” *Intergovernmental Perspective* 18:1 (Winter 1982): 6-8, 18.

⁹³ ACIR, *Characteristics of Federal Grant-in-Aid Programs to State and Local Governments: Grants Funded FY 1995*, M-195 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1995), p. 3.

⁹⁴ For further analysis, CRS Report R40451, *The Donor-Donee State Issue: Funding Equity in Surface Transportation Reauthorization*, by Robert S. Kirk.

efforts by Representative John Kasich in the House and Senator Connie Mack in the Senate to devolve most non-interstate highway and mass transit programs to states. Their Surface Transportation and Transit Empowerment Act (H.R. 3045 and S. 1497) would have returned “to the individual States maximum discretionary authority and fiscal responsibility for all elements of the national transportation systems that are not within the direct purview of the Federal Government.”⁹⁵

The proposed Surface Transportation and Transit Empowerment Act did not generate the level of congressional attention provided to the state donor-donee debate. Nonetheless, the arguments presented both for and against its adoption are relevant today given that the devolution issue may be considered during SAFETEA’s reauthorization. However, current fiscal conditions are much different today than in 1997 and 1998. It could be argued that the current economic fiscal crisis may limit the states’ fiscal capacity to assume responsibility for federal surface transportation projects if they were asked, as they were in 1997 and 1998, to increase state fuel taxes to fund those projects.

At a House subcommittee hearing on ISTEA’s reauthorization in 1997, Senator Mack defended his devolution proposal, arguing that “the simple fact is that states now have the technical capability to build their own roads and, frankly, they know better than Washington what their transportation needs are. A continued role for the federal government is appropriate in certain areas, such as the maintenance of the interstate highway system or limited coordination functions.”⁹⁶ He added:

current policy has been unable to keep up with our Nation’s growing infrastructure needs. One reason for this is that we have not been getting as much out of our transportation dollars as we used to. For instance, since 1956 Federal Highway Administration costs have grown from 7 percent to 21 percent today. Moreover, studies suggest the elimination of Federal mandates and restrictions would increase States’ real purchasing power for transportation projects by 20 percent.⁹⁷

Representative Kasich stated at the hearing that Ohio was one of 32 states at that time that received less from ISTEA than its highway users paid into the Highway Trust Fund. He added that the governors of Michigan, Ohio, California, South Carolina and Florida, all states that received less ISTEA funding at that time than their highway users paid into the Highway Trust Fund, had endorsed his bill. He argued that “if you let us keep our money and get rid of all the Federal bureaucracy and all the Federal rules, we’ll be able to actually have more highway construction.”⁹⁸

On April 1, 1998, Representative Kasich offered his bill as an amendment in the nature of a substitute to BESTEA (Building Efficient Surface Transportation and Equity Act of 1998), the House ISTEA reauthorization bill. During floor debate, Representative E. G. “Bud” Shuster,

⁹⁵ Rep. John Kasich, “Building Efficient Surface Transportation And Equity Act of 1998,” House debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 144, part 4 (April 1, 1998), p. 5723.

⁹⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Surface Transportation, *Reauthorization of the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA): Comprehensive Reauthorization Proposals*, 105th Cong., 1st sess., February 12, 1997 (Washington, DC: GPO, 1997), p. 11.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

Chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, rose in opposition to the amendment, arguing:

while this would simply turn things back to the States, ironically there is a greater need for us to have a coordinated, tied-together national transportation system than ever. Why? Because more people and more goods are moving interstate than ever before.⁹⁹

He also argued that “Indeed, there is a greater need to have this tied together than ever before. Our bill not only does that, but it also gives flexibilities to the States and the cities by saying that 50 percent of the funding in each category can be flexibly moved about to other categories.”¹⁰⁰ He added that “It is very important, also, to recognize that, of the money that comes to Washington now, only 1 percent stays here down at the Department of Transportation for administrative purposes, 88 percent goes back to the States to be spent, 5 percent goes to the Secretary of Transportation to be sent back to the States for high cost discretionary projects, 5 percent goes back to the States through the congressional projects, and only 1 percent stays in Washington.”¹⁰¹ He concluded by arguing:

Further, State regulations, which in many cases are as onerous, if not more onerous, than Federal regulations, would obviously stay in place. Indeed, we have no assurance whatsoever that, if we turn this back to the States, that the States would pass and increase their gas taxes. Indeed, I am told that, on the average, each State would have to pass the State gas tax increasing it by 15 cents per gallon. So what assurance do we have? No, this is simply destroying what must be a national program which is to tie our country together from a transportation point of view. For those reasons, I say we should defeat this amendment.¹⁰²

Representative James Oberstar also opposed the amendment, arguing that it would:

... take us back to a time that none of us here could possibly imagine, a time when some States started roads, others did not, they built it up to a certain point and then it stopped. Bridges were started and then stopped. If we followed the gentleman’s logic all the way through, we would have bridges go halfway across a river because one State would want to build it and the other State would not or would run out of money, or we would have roads that go up to a State’s border and the other State would say “Well, we don’t think that we want to build a road there.” ... [the amendment] would have us in chaos. ... This is a vote for the past, not a vote for the future. ... If we are going to be a Nation, and if my colleagues believe in the Constitution that said a responsibility of the Congress shall be to build post roads, that it shall have authority over interstate and foreign commerce, then it is our duty to promote interstate and foreign commerce, and the way to do it is through transportation.¹⁰³

The amendment was defeated, 98-318.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁹ Rep. Bud Shuster, “Building Efficient Surface Transportation and Equity Act of 1998,” House debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 144, part 4 (April 1, 1998), p. 5728.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ Rep. James Oberstar, “Building Efficient Surface Transportation And Equity Act of 1998,” House debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 144, part 4 (April 1, 1998), p. 5730.

¹⁰⁴ Rep. John Kasich, “Building Efficient Surface Transportation And Equity Act of 1998,” House debate, *Congressional Record*, vol. 144, part 4 (April 1, 1998), pp. 5723-5734.

Much of the remaining congressional debate on ISTEA's reauthorization focused on the state return-on-investment (state donor-donee) issue, ending the diversion of revenue generated by 4.3 cents per gallon of the gasoline tax from the Highway Trust Fund to the general revenue account for deficit reduction (enacted in 1993), and the inclusion of congressional earmarks.

The \$203.4 billion, six-year Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century (TEA-21, P.L. 105-178), signed by President Clinton on June 9, 1998, effectively ended the diversion of highway trust fund revenue for deficit reduction by authorizing \$167.1 billion for highways and \$36.3 billion for mass transit, roughly equivalent to the amount of revenue expected to be generated by the Highway Trust Fund. TEA-21 also created a three-part state minimum guarantee program. First, each state was guaranteed a percentage share (set forth in tabular form) for the apportioned programs: Interstate Maintenance Program, National Highway System Program, Surface Transportation Program, Highway Bridge Replacement and Rehabilitation Program, Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Program, Metropolitan Planning, Recreational Trails Program, Appalachian Development Highway System Program and Minimum Guarantee, as well as High Priority Projects. Second, each state was guaranteed at least 90.5% of the amount its highway users paid into the Highway Trust Fund (based on the most recent year for which the data are available, typically from two fiscal years before). Third, each state was guaranteed that as part of the minimum guarantee it will receive at least \$1 million in minimum guarantee funds.

Although efforts to devolve surface transportation programs to states failed, TEA-21 retained ISTEA's programmatic flexibilities and increased them further by reducing from 16 to 7 the number of required planning factors to be used by states and MPOs when selecting projects, and increasing the role of local elected government officials in project selection. Congress did not accept the President's proposed language making Amtrak eligible for STP funding, but it did make Amtrak eligible for Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality Improvement funding.

Balancing State Program Flexibilities with the Need to Address National Interests: SAFETEA

On May 14, 2003, President George W. Bush announced his Administration's TEA-21 reauthorization proposal, the six-year, \$247 billion, Safe, Accountable, Flexible and Efficient Transportation Equity Act of 2003 (SAFETEA, H.R. 2088, S. 1072). One of the bill's stated goals was to change federalism relationships in surface transportation policy by eliminating "program silos" that can alter state and local government decisions based on the availability of funds.¹⁰⁵ The bill proposed to accomplish this by eliminating most discretionary highway grant programs and making those funds available under the core formula highway grant programs; creating a new Highway Safety Improvement Program, in place of the existing Surface Transportation Program safety set-aside; and merging several highway safety programs into a new General Performance Grant and a new Safety Belt Performance Grant. It also would have merged mass transit grants into three main programs: an Urbanized Area Formula Grant, which would have included the existing Urbanized Area Formula Grant and the Fixed Guideway Modernization program; a Major Capital Investments Program, which would have included the

¹⁰⁵ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs, *The Administration's Proposal for Reauthorization of the Federal Public Transportation Program*, Hearing on the Reauthorization of the Public Transportation Title of the Transportation Equity Act For the Twenty-First Century (TEA-21), 108th Cong., 1st sess., June 10, 2003, S. Hrg. 108-640 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2004), pp. 17, 18.

New Starts program and non-fixed guideway corridor improvements, such as Bus Rapid Transit; and State-Administered Programs, which would have included the Rural, Elderly and Disabled, Job Access and Reverse Commute, and New Freedom Initiative programs.¹⁰⁶

Although Congress did consider proposals to change federalism relationships in surface transportation policy during TEA-21's reauthorization, most of its attention, once again, was focused on resolving disagreements over funding levels and how funds were to be distributed among states.¹⁰⁷ Donor states, mainly those with growing populations located in the South and Southwest, wanted TEA-21's state minimum guarantee increased from 90.5% to 95% of the amount their highway users contributed to the Highway Trust Fund. Several donor states, including Arizona, California, Florida, North Carolina and Texas, also wanted to increase the scope of the guarantee by increasing the range of programs included when calculating each state's share.

Donee states did not object to a higher minimum guarantee in principle, but only if it did not reduce their funding. However, because the President threatened to veto any substantial funding increase above his initial recommendation of \$247 billion and Congress lacked the votes to override his veto on this issue, it became virtually impossible to increase the state minimum funding guarantee without reducing funding for at least some states. Unable to reach agreement, Congress extended TEA-21 for short periods 12 times before finally passing the \$286 billion Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act - A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA) on July 29, 2005. It was signed by President Bush on August 10, 2005. It was only after the President removed his veto threat (partly due to a 2004 change in the tax treatment of ethanol fuel, which was expected to generate an additional \$18.9 billion for the Highway Trust Fund) and the program's overall funding level was increased to \$286 billion that the impasse over the minimum guarantee was resolved.

SAFETEA created an Equity Bonus (EB) program that ensures that states receive a specified percentage of the revenue their highway users contribute to the highway account of the Highway Trust Fund for programs listed in the EB program. The guaranteed rate was set at 91.5% for FY2007, and 92% for FYs 2008 and 2009. SAFETEA also includes a guaranteed overall increase for all states over the previous reauthorization bill, and a number of "hold harmless" provisions intended to mitigate the impact on certain donee states of the shift in funding to donor states. Meeting all of these requirements is done by providing a spending overlay across all of the programs listed in the EB program in a way that gives spending increases to all states, but larger increases to donor states. The EB program is the largest formula program in SAFETEA (\$41 billion over five years).¹⁰⁸ In an important concession to donor states, funds for members projects were included in the funds that are distributed by the equity bonus formula.

¹⁰⁶ U.S. Congress, House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, Subcommittee on Highways, Transit and Pipelines, *Overview of the Administration's Proposed Reauthorization Bill (SAFETEA)*, Hearing on the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act (SAFETEA) of 2003, 108th Cong., 1st sess., May 15, 2003, Committee Serial No. 108-26 (Washington, DC: GPO, 2003).

¹⁰⁷ For additional information, see CRS Report RL32226, *Highway and Transit Program Reauthorization Legislation in the 2nd Session, 108th Congress*, by John W. Fischer; CRS Report RL33119, *Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act—A Legacy for Users (SAFETEA-LU or SAFETEA): Selected Major Provisions*, coordinated by John W. Fischer; and CRS Report RL31665, *Highway and Transit Program Reauthorization*, by John W. Fischer; and CRS Report 31735, *Federal-Aid Highway Program: "Donor-Donee" State Issues*, by Robert S. Kirk (available by request from the author).

¹⁰⁸ For further analysis, see CRS Report R40451, *The Donor-Donee State Issue: Funding Equity in Surface* (continued...)

Balancing its interest in ensuring that the program meets national needs with its interest in continuing to expand state programmatic flexibility, Congress did not adopt President Bush's recommendation to eliminate discretionary programs and reduce the number of formula programs in SAFETEA. Instead, SAFETEA added three new formula programs: the previously described core formula Highway Safety Improvement Program (\$7.5 billion), the Coordinated Border Infrastructure Program, which replaced a TEA-21 discretionary program of the same name, and the Safe Routes to School Program. Also, a new discretionary transportation improvement program, a redefined national corridor infrastructure program (formerly part of the national corridor planning and development and coordinated border infrastructure program), and a new program for projects of national or regional significance were added. SAFETEA retained TEA-21's provisions that had expanded state authority to shift funds among core, formula-driven highway programs and between highways and mass transit. It also included a new provision allowing states to transfer certain discretionary program funds for administration of highway projects and mass transit projects. It also enhanced environmental streamlining regulations, changed clean air conformity regulations, funding for transit new starts, expanded reliance on innovative financing and tolls and spending on congressional high priority projects.

MOEs and The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

P.L. 111-5, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 (ARRA), included \$27.5 billion for highway, bridge and road projects, \$8.4 billion for mass transit and \$8.6 billion for discretionary grants to states to help fund capital costs associated with intercity rail services, with an emphasis on developing high-speed rail services. As a condition for the receipt of funding for these programs, the law includes a state maintenance-of-effort (MOE) requirement that requires the Governor of each state to certify to the Secretary of Transportation that

the State will maintain its effort with regard to State funding for the types of projects that are funded by the appropriation. As part of this certification, the Governor shall submit to the Secretary of Transportation a statement identifying the amount of funds the State planned to expend from State sources as of the date of enactment of this Act during the period beginning on the date of enactment of this Act through September 30, 2010, for the types of projects that are funded by the appropriation.¹⁰⁹

States are required to submit a report on their activities not later than 90 days after the act's enactment and an updated report not later than 180 days, one year, two years, and three years after enactment. States that are unable to maintain the level of effort will be prohibited by the Secretary of Transportation from receiving additional funds "pursuant to the redistribution of the limitation on obligations for Federal-aid highway and highway safety construction programs that occurs after August 1 for fiscal year 2011."¹¹⁰

Because state budgets are fungible and nominal state revenue tends to increase over time, when states receive federal financial assistance they typically have several budgetary options. They can choose to not make any budgetary adjustments other than to supplement existing spending levels with the federal assistance, or they can choose to substitute all or a portion of the federal funds

(...continued)

Transportation Reauthorization, by Robert S. Kirk.

¹⁰⁹ P.L. 111-5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

received for existing state funds and use the savings to spend in other areas, reduce taxes, or increase their state “rainy day” funds. An examination of grants-in-aid listed in the Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance revealed that 33 federal grants to state and local governments have state spending MOE requirements to prevent states from substituting federal funds for existing state funds.

An analysis completed by the Government Accountability Office in 2004 found that “state and local governments have used roughly half of the increases in federal highway grants since 1982 to substitute for funding they would otherwise have spent from their own resources. In addition, our model estimated that the rate of grant substitution increased significantly over the past two decades, rising from about 18 cents on the dollar during the early 1980s to roughly 60 cents on the dollar during the 1990s.”¹¹¹

Because state revenue growth has declined in recent years, it could be argued that states facing a budgetary shortfall are not likely to substitute federal funds received from the economic recovery plan for existing state funds. Instead, it could be argued that at least some states, particularly those facing budgetary shortfalls, might have a difficult time finding state revenue to maintain their previous spending levels. In either case, state MOE requirements may become an issue during SAFETEA’s reauthorization and will be the subject of congressional interest and oversight during ARRA’s implementation.

States have traditionally opposed state MOE requirements as an infringement on their sovereignty. For example, on January 15, 2008 the National Governors Association, National Conference of State Legislatures, and State Higher Education Executive Officers sent a letter to the chairs and ranking Members of the House Committee on Education and Labor and Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions opposing a proposed MOE mandate in the College Opportunity and Affordability Act (H.R. 4137) because they believed that it infringed on state autonomy:

Governors, legislators, and higher education officials share your desire to help make higher education accessible and affordable for students and families. They also share your concern with the rising cost of higher education, and are committed to making higher education easily accessible and affordable to all our citizens.

That said, state budgeting decisions should be made by state officials. The decision to fund a new building or campus, expand student aid, help low-income families to access health care, or improve high schools, must remain with the officials closest to the needs of their specific communities.¹¹²

¹¹¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Federal-Aid Highways: Trends, Effect on State Spending, and Options for Future Program Design*, GAO-04-802, August 2004, p. 3, <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d04802.pdf>.

¹¹² Letter from Raymond C. Scheppach, Executive Director, National Governors Association, Paul E. Lingenfelter, President, State Higher Education Executive Officers, and William T. Pound, Executive Director, National Conference of State Legislatures, to The Honorable Edward “Ted” M. Kennedy, Chairman, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, The Honorable Michael B. Enzi, Ranking Member, Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, The Honorable George Miller, Chairman, Committee on Education and Labor, and The Honorable Howard P. “Buck” McKeon, Ranking Member, Committee on Education and Labor, January 15, 2008, <http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.cb6e7818b34088d18a278110501010a0/?vgnnextoid=4a33ae4748977110VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=4b18f074f0d9ff00VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD>.

Opponents of state MOE requirements also argue that during prosperous times MOEs discourage increased state spending in areas receiving federal assistance. For example, on July 31, 2008 the National Governors Association opposed a state MOE requirement in the Higher Education Opportunity Act (P.L. 110-315) because it would penalize states that increased spending during good economic times and decreased them during economic downturns:

Governors must balance their budgets in both good and bad economic times. This mandate means that states will be unable to make major increases or invest one-time surpluses in higher education during good times because they will be penalized if forced to reduce spending during difficult times. In the end, this will increase the cost of college for students and their families.¹¹³

Advocates of state MOE requirements argue that states should not be allowed to substitute federal assistance for existing state and local government spending. In their view, federal assistance should either supplement current state spending in the functional area receiving federal assistance or encourage states to increase their current level of spending in that area. For example, in 1978 the now-defunct U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (ACIR) argued that

Maintenance-of-effort requirements and matching ratios should be considered together. Without an effective maintenance-of-effort requirement, a categorical grant with no matching requirements likely will result in reduced spending from recipients' own funds for the aided function.¹¹⁴

Federal Reimbursement Rates and The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009

ARRA set federal reimbursement rates for funding received from the act for several programs, including highway, bridge and road projects, transit capital assistance, fixed guideway infrastructure investment, and capital assistance for high speed rail corridors and intercity passenger rail service, at up to 100%. It remains to be seen if ARRA's up to 100% reimbursement rate will be viewed as a precedent for re-opening discussions of SAFETEA's reimbursement rates, or it will be viewed as an aberration designed to meet a special economic circumstance. One possibility is that the states' ability or inability to meet ARRA's transportation MOE requirements may have an effect on congressional views concerning any proposals to increase the federal share of expenses in SAFETEA's programs or to waive, as Senator Bernard Sanders' and Representative Peter Welch's legislation (S. 198, H.R. 491) proposed to do for FY2009, "any requirement that would otherwise require a state or local government to contribute non-federal funds toward the cost of a covered transportation program or activity authorized by SAFTETEA or an amendment made by that Act."¹¹⁵

¹¹³ National Governors Association, "NGA Statement on Higher Education Bill," Press release, July 31, 2008, <http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.6c9a8a9ebc6ae07eee28aca9501010a0/?vgnnextoid=9d9608b7bda7b110VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD&vgnnextchannel=759b8f2005361010VgnVCM1000001a01010aRCRD>.

¹¹⁴ U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, *Categorical Grants: Their Role and Design* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1978), p. 174.

¹¹⁵ H.R. 491.

SAFETEA Reauthorization Efforts During the 111th Congress

As mentioned previously, in February 2009, the Obama Administration indicated that it was interested in exploring alternative means to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Highway Trust Fund. However, concerned that the congressional agenda already included several high-profile issues, including health care reform, global warming, and appropriations legislation, and still considering the various proposed options for funding surface transportation projects, the Obama Administration announced on June 17, 2009, that instead of pursuing a comprehensive reauthorization of SAFETEA, it supported a cash infusion of \$20 billion to replenish the Highway Trust Fund to avert a revenue shortfall later that year and the enactment of an 18-month reauthorization of SAFETEA, without major programmatic changes. The Administration asserted that an 18-month extension of existing legislation would provide “Congress the time it needs to fully deliberate the direction of America’s transportation priorities.”¹¹⁶

Senator Barbara Boxer, chair of the Senate Environment and Public Works, endorsed the Administration’s call for a 18-month extension of SAFETEA, stating at a congressional hearing on June 25, 2009, that “we have a lot of issues on the table in terms of a long-term solution to our funding” and an 18-month extension “provided a level of funding certainty” for state and local government transportation officials that was preferable to a shorter-term extension.¹¹⁷

Representative James Oberstar, then-chair of the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, and others in the House preferred a comprehensive reauthorization bill. On June 18, 2009, Representative Oberstar, then-ranking member John Mica, and others on the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure released a draft of a six-year, \$450 billion SAFETEA reauthorization bill.¹¹⁸ The proposal would have also authorized an additional \$50 billion to develop 11 high-speed rail corridors linking major metropolitan regions within the United States. The committee’s Subcommittee on Highways and Transit held a hearing on the proposal on June 24, 2009.

The proposal, which was not formally introduced as a bill, would have provided \$337.4 billion for highway construction, \$99.8 billion for mass transit, and \$12.6 billion for highway and motor carrier safety. It also would have

- consolidated funding in four, core formula categories: highway and bridge systems, highway safety; improved capacity; and congestion and greenhouse gas emissions;
- focused the majority of transit funding in four core categories: repair, restoration, mobility and access, and planning;

¹¹⁶ U.S. Department of Transportation, “Let’s face reality on the Highway Trust Fund, not rush comprehensive legislation,” Washington, DC, June 18, 2010, <http://fastlane.dot.gov/2009/06/lets-face-reality-on-the-highway-trust-fund.html>. Also see Ray LaHood, Secretary of the Department of Transportation, “Statement Before the Committee on Environment and Public Works, United States Senate,” Washington, DC, June 25, 2009, http://epw.senate.gov/public/index.cfm?FuseAction=Files.View&FileStore_id=186af0e4-fa98-49e1-874b-b14d8c3ab270.

¹¹⁷ U.S. Congress, Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works, *Impacts of Expected Highway Trust Fund Insolvency*, 111th Cong., June 25, 2009.

¹¹⁸ House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, “The Surface Transportation Authorization Act of 2009: A Blueprint for Investment and Reform Executive Summary,” Washington, DC, June 18, 2009, http://t4america.org/docs/061809_STAA_summary.pdf. The draft bill can be viewed here: <http://atfiles.org/files/pdf/STransJune22bill09.pdf>.

- required states and local governments to establish transportation plans with specific performance standards, measure their progress annually in meeting these standards, and periodically adjust their plans as necessary to achieve specific goals;
- created a national infrastructure bank to leverage transportation funding; and
- consolidated or terminated more than 75 transportation programs.

Congress subsequently passed legislation that transferred an additional \$21.7 billion in general fund revenues associated with transportation-related activities to the Highway Trust Fund.¹¹⁹ Congress also passed four short-term SAFETEA reauthorizations during the 111th Congress.¹²⁰

On September 6, 2010, President Obama proposed a six-year reauthorization of surface transportation programs, with \$50 billion in “upfront investment in our nation’s infrastructure” to “help jump-start additional job creation.”¹²¹ The Administration did not provide an estimate for the total amount of funding for the reauthorization, but indicated that the \$50 billion would represent a significant portion of any increase above current levels. The proposal called for

- the establishment of an infrastructure bank “to leverage federal funding and focus on investments of national and regional significance that often fall through the cracks in the current siloed transportation programs.”¹²²
- the integration of high-speed rail on an equal footing into the surface transportation program “to ensure a sustained and effective commitment to a national high speed rail system over the next generation.”¹²³
- consolidating more than 100 different programs and focusing on using performance measurement and “race-to-the-top” style competitive pressures to drive investment toward better policy outcomes.¹²⁴

¹¹⁹ P.L. 111-46, To restore sums to the Highway Trust Fund, and for other purposes (\$7 billion); and P.L. 111-147, the Hiring Incentives to Restore Employment Act (\$14.7 billion). P.L. 111-147 also transferred \$4.8 billion to the mass transit account. Earlier, P.L. 110-318, To amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to restore the Highway Trust Fund balance, transferred \$8 billion into the Highway Trust Fund. See CRS Report R41512, *Surface Transportation Program Reauthorization Issues for the 112th Congress*, coordinated by Robert S. Kirk.

¹²⁰ P.L. 111-118, the Department of Defense Appropriations Act, 2010; P.L. 111-144, the Temporary Extension Act of 2010, P.L. 111-147; the Hiring Incentives to Restore Employment Act; and P.L. 111-322, the Continuing Appropriations and Surface Transportation Extensions Act, 2011.

¹²¹ The White House, “President Obama to Announce Plan to Renew and Expand America’s Roads, Railways and Runways,” Washington, DC, September 6, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/06/president-obama-announce-plan-renew-and-expand-america-s-roads-railways->; Also, see The White House, “Remarks by the President at Laborfest in Milwaukee, Wisconsin,” Milwaukee, Wisconsin, September 6, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/06/remarks-president-laborfest-milwaukee-wisconsin>.

¹²² The White House, “President Obama to Announce Plan to Renew and Expand America’s Roads, Railways and Runways,” Washington, DC, September 6, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/06/president-obama-announce-plan-renew-and-expand-america-s-roads-railways->. The Administration argued that the establishment of the infrastructure bank “marks an important departure from the federal government’s traditional way of spending on infrastructure through earmarks and formula-based grants that are allocated more by geography and politics than demonstrated value.”

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

- increasing funding for safety, environmental sustainability, economic competitiveness, and livability projects, “helping to build communities where people have choices about how to travel, including options that reduce oil consumption, lower greenhouse gas emissions, and expand access to job opportunities and housing that’s affordable.”¹²⁵

Congress did not act on the proposal.

SAFETEA Reauthorization Efforts During the 112th Congress

On March 3, 2011, Congress passed another short-term SAFETEA reauthorization bill and President Obama signed it into law on March 4, 2011. The latest extension is set to expire on September 30, 2011.¹²⁶ Both the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and the Senate Committee on Environment and Public Works continue to hold hearings on SAFETEA’s reauthorization and to consult with the Obama Administration.¹²⁷

Concluding Observations

Congress has debated the federal role in surface transportation policy since the nation’s formation in 1789. A review of the historical record suggests that the debate over the federal role in surface transportation policy has been influenced by factors both internal and external to the institution. Internally, the background, personalities, and ideological preferences of congressional leaders such as Senator Harry Byrd, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Representative E. G. “Bud” Shuster have had a profound impact on the development of federal-state-local government relationships in surface transportation policy over time. The norms, customs, and traditions of the House and Senate have also had an influence. For example, the decentralized nature of decision-making in both the House and the Senate has compartmentalized decisions into more manageable pieces, but, arguably, has made it more difficult for Congress to develop broad-based policies that cut across committee jurisdictions or to enact proposals to consolidate programs or devolve programmatic authority to states as these actions might upset existing power relationships and require the consent of several committees and committee chairs. For example, in the House of Representatives, programmatic and funding distribution issues are under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, but tax and Highway Trust Fund issues are under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Ways and Means. In the Senate, most programmatic and funding distribution issues are under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Environment and Public Works for highways and other aspects of Title 23, but are under the Committee on

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ P.L. 112-5, the Surface Transportation Extension Act of 2011.

¹²⁷ The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure’s website lists the Committee’s priorities for SAFETEA’s reauthorization, which include, among others, consolidating and reforming surface transportation programs “so that federal Highway Trust Fund revenues are spent on programs and projects that are truly in the federal interest;” providing states “the flexibility they need to address their unique transportation challenges by establishing innovative financing options” and that “take advantage of private sector expertise and capital;” eliminating “unnecessary bureaucratic red tape so that infrastructure projects can be built in half the time;” and establishing a national transportation plan. See U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, “Subcommittee on Highways and Transit,” Washington, DC, <http://transportation.house.gov/subcommittees/Highways.aspx>.

Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs for transit. Tax and Highway Trust Fund issues are under the jurisdiction of the Committee on Finance. In the Senate, most safety issues are under the jurisdiction of either the Committee on Environment and Public Works or the Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation. The size of the 59-member House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure may also have an impact on federal-state-local relationships in surface transportation policy as each Member has a natural tendency to attempt to maximize surface transportation resources for their home district. Arguably, the committee's unusually large size could make it more difficult to eliminate congressional earmarks or to achieve committee approval for program consolidations or devolution of programmatic authority because such changes are often viewed as jeopardizing existing funding streams and the ability of Members to claim and receive credit for helping their constituents.¹²⁸

Externally, interest groups representing both the private and public sectors have historically been united in their advocacy of additional federal funding, but have been divided over how program funds should be allocated, both among states and among transportation modes. Congress has tended to arbitrate the differences among these varied interests by balancing the need to promote the national interest with the recognition that, for the most part, state and local government officials have proven over time to be relatively capable administrators of surface transportation programs. As a result, Congress has rejected efforts to devolve programmatic authority to states. Instead, it has adopted policies that have expanded state programmatic flexibility while, at the same time, promote the national interest by requiring state and local governments to adhere to federal guidelines for managing the project development process and monitoring highway and bridge conditions, highway safety programs, traffic congestion mitigation programs, transit facility and equipment maintenance programs, as well as intermodal transportation facilities and systems.

Presidents, perhaps reflecting their role in representing the national interest as a whole and, perhaps, at least in part, because several Presidents had formerly served as governors, have tended to be more supportive of program consolidation and devolution of programmatic authority in surface transportation policy than Congress. This has been especially the case when the President's ideology favored smaller government. Typically, presidential efforts to consolidate surface transportation programs have faced strong opposition from private sector interest groups worried that program consolidation will result in less funding for the consolidated programs over time, and from Members worried that consolidation could lead to less funding for specific programs that are important to them.

Perhaps the most difficult factor to account for in the development of federalism relationships in surface transportation policy over time has been the changing nature of American society and expectations concerning personal mobility. Once a rural society with relatively limited expectations concerning personal mobility, America is now a primarily urban/suburban society where automobile ownership and the personal mobility that automobile ownership brings is not only a powerful social status symbol but also a necessity. Obtaining a drivers' license is now a major life-altering event, signifying for millions of American teenagers each year the transition from childhood to adulthood. Because the American bond with the automobile is strong, moving away from a primary focus on building and constructing highways towards a "more balanced" intermodal transportation approach has been made more difficult for policymakers at all levels of

¹²⁸ David R. Mayhew, *Congress: The Electoral Connection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 52-61. The House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure had 75 members during the 111th Congress.

government. Moreover, given the public's relatively high expectations concerning personal mobility, Congress has been reluctant to consolidate or devolve surface transportation programs to states, at least in part, because some Members worry that if states are provided additional authority and fail to meet public expectations, that they might be held accountable for that failure on election day. In their view, a more prudent, risk-adverse approach is to provide states additional programmatic flexibility, but retain a federal presence through both program oversight and the imposition of federal guidelines to ensure that states do not stray too far from national objectives.

It remains to be seen how all of these factors will play out during SAFETEA's reauthorization. One certainty is that Congress will play the key role in determining the future of federalism relationships in surface transportation policy. Another is that those relationships will continue to evolve over time, adopting to changes in American society and in Congress.

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