

Summary of NEC Transportation Committee Meeting In Washington, D.C.

Dear Transportation Committee Member:

ON March 27, 2014, members of the NEC Transportation Committee held a forty-five discussion with Murphie Barrett, staff director for the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee's Highways and Transit Subcommittee. Ms. Barrett began the conversation by providing an update as to where the Congress is in relation to finalizing a Water Resources Reform and Development Act (WRRDA) reauthorization bill. She noted that legislation had passed both the House and the Senate, and that the two bodies were currently reconciling differences between their respective bills. Ms. Barrett expressed optimism that the House and Senate conferees would be able to come to an agreement on a compromise measure in the near future.

Ms. Barrett then turned to the prospects of the House passing a surface transportation bill. She stated that the goal of the Committee Chairman is to pass a bill prior to the end of September when the current authorization bill, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP21), expires. She indicated that MAP21 was "six years of policy with 2 years worth of funding" and that more could be done going forward to build on the reforms that were included in MAP21. She noted a desire to continue to reduce burdens on project delivery; to get red tape out of the way. She indicated that the federal government can be a good partner on such things as emerging technologies, citing as an example the technology that is being utilized on driverless cars. She further mentioned that the Committee was looking at innovative financing, particularly, the recently-formed special Committee panel on public-private partnerships (P3s).

Other priorities touched on by Ms. Barrett included a need to reauthorize the various programs and functions associated with the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) in 2015, and that the relevant subcommittee was addressing that issue. She also stated that the Passenger Rail Investment and Improvement Act (PRIIA), which governs Amtrak and intercity passenger rail, needs to be reauthorized as well.

Ms. Barrett entertained questions from New England Council members and the first was to ascertain if tolling on interstates would be expanded. She responded that there was not much political appetite to expand tolling in a MAP21 reauthorization bill, and particularly pointing out that the trucking industry would oppose tolling on existing interstates. A question was then asked related to Hours of Service requirements for commercial drivers and whether exemptions could be made at peak times as identified by industry, or during natural disasters. Ms. Barrett responded that there was indeed legislation that would take "another look" at the federal rule governing Hours of Service requirements, but also noted that highway safety groups generally opposed making blanket changes. She stated that there could be room to make case-by-case assessments, noting that an exemption governing home-heating oil deliveries was recently signed into law.

Ms. Barrett was asked about the timing surrounding a MAP21 reauthorization bill, and she responded that the Committee wanted to get something done “on time,” that the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is looking at having a bill by the end of April (followed by the Senate’s other relevant committees), and that the President’s proposal has not been filed. She said there was no “drop dead” date in terms of passing a bill, but the Chairman’s goal was to have a Committee bill by late spring/early summer. She also said that the preference was for as long a term bill as possible, and that much relied on the respective House and Senate tax panels coming up with the right amount of funds. A question was asked about funding options and Ms. Barrett stated that the Chairman was looking at all options, but did note that the “landscape had not shifted” in terms of broadening the federal gas tax. Ms. Barrett was asked about the prospects of other pending legislation that would allow for the capitalization of bond programs, which she noted would fund projects but would not wholly address the need to fund programs. In terms of whether the Committee may consider a change in the formula distribution for highways and transit dollars, Ms. Barrett said that her view was there was no plan to change the current formula. Finally, a request was made that anything legislative that is done by the Committee relative to public private partnerships include a similar performance requirement as is in the Miller Act.

Ms. Barrett thanked the Council’s Transportation Committee Members for coming in to share their concerns. Upon departing, Council staff provided Ms. Barrett with a letter (see attached) asking that when the Committee addresses the reauthorization of MAP 21, that it consider as long an authorization as possible.

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