

February 13, 2015

NEC Transportation Policy Committee Conference Call Notes

Dear NEC Transportation Policy Committee Member:

Members of the New England Council's Transportation Committee held a conference call on February 5th and discussed Committee priorities for the upcoming year and for the new Congress. More than twenty Council members and staff participated in the conference call.

The meeting kicked-off with a discussion of the several major legislative initiatives expected to be before Congress during the year. First and foremost, is a surface transportation bill, and with the current authorization expiring at the end of May, this is likely the bill that needs the most immediate attention. It was noted that the President put forth his six-year transportation blueprint earlier in the week that included a new funding mechanism based on the repatriation of certain overseas corporate income. There was also acknowledgment that some on Capitol Hill still are advocating for an increase in the federal gas tax to pay for upgrades to infrastructure. Many in Congress, particularly leaders like House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Bill Shuster (R-PA) and House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Paul Ryan (R-WI), have expressed little support for a gas tax increase.

The New England Council has been a long-standing proponent of a multi-year surface transportation bill, and is pleased that both the White House and Congress seem to agree that a six-year bill is the way to proceed. However, it was requested that the Committee weigh-in on whether the Council also should take a position on raising the federal gas tax to pay for the bill as some transportation and business advocates have done. When put to the Members of the Committee during the call, some expressed support for raising the federal gas tax to pay for a long term surface transportation bill. It was noted that Representative Earl Blumenauer (D-OR) had put forth a bill raising the gas tax by a nickel over the next three years. Other Members expressed support, but acknowledged that it would be a tough sell to get a gas tax increase through Congress given the level of opposition. Some Committee members proposed that rather than focusing exclusively on raising the gas tax, that the Committee look to not exclude funding options but encourage all potential sources of funding that can sustain transportation growth not just for this bill, but for years thereafter.

A Council member asked, given the elections, if there were any changes on the transportation front in congressional committees that would have an impact on moving forward with a surface transportation bill. In the Senate, the new Environment and Public Works (EPW) Committee Chairman is Senator Jim Inhofe (R-OK) who takes over from Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA). He is and always has been an advocate of the federal government addressing America's infrastructure needs, and since his committee writes most of the non-financial part of the bill in the Senate, that is a positive development. House Transportation and Infrastructure Chairman Bill Shuster (R-PA) has indicated he wants a bill as has Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee Chairman John Thune (R-SD). Changes on the Senate Finance Committee with new Chairman Orrin Hatch (R-UT) and with Representative Ryan now chairing the Ways and Means Committee would not necessarily stop matters from proceeding however they ultimately would need to come to an agreement on a means to adequately fund a multi-year bill.

In terms of aviation, the current authorization for the FAA expires at the end of September. Congress has been working towards a new law and the House is slightly ahead of schedule. Chairman Shuster wants a "bold and innovative" bill. However there will be some tough issues that will need to be negotiated. Among these are whether or not to raise passenger facility charges, privatize the air traffic control system, or severely regulate the use of drones. A general concern was raised as to ensuring adequate funding for FAA programs and policies. Council staff indicated they would monitor and report on the actions Congress takes as they move forward with legislation.

The discussion next turned to Amtrak reauthorization, where it was mentioned that a bill was passed by the House Transportation and Infrastructure (T&I) Committee in the fall of 2014, but was not considered by the full House of Representatives. Legislation is anticipated to be brought up early in the 114th Congress that should look similar to last year's bill. Last year's legislation was unique in that it specifically advocated for more resources to be utilized on the Northeast Corridor since Chairman Shuster believes that is where the rail line is most economical. A Council Member stated that in the Senate, an Amtrak bill is not as big a priority for Commerce Committee Chairman John Thune (R-SD), noting that Amtrak is not in his state. [Note: the House T&I Committee marked-up an [Amtrak bill](#) on February 12th.]

Council staff discussed a potential meeting with congressional staff to be held in conjunction with the New England Council's annual March event in Washington, D.C. That meeting would be held on March 26th. In addition, Committee members were asked their preferences for Senators or Representatives to address the Committee at other points throughout the year. It was noted that the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee was headed-up by Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) and Senator Jack Reed (D-RI). Among other speakers of

interest were Senator Ed Markey (D-MA) who is on the Commerce, Science, and Transportation and EPW Committees, as well as Elizabeth Esty (D-CT) who is on the House T&I Committee. One other request came in for one or more Department of Transportation officials, particularly with expertise in the federal grant process.

The meeting wrapped up with a thank you from Committee Chairman Steve Silveira for participating on the call, and a hope to see all Committee Members in Washington for the Council's annual March event.

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