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Bipartisan deal on highway bill renewal leaves funding up in the air

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Veteran lawmakers representing California in Congress are leaving office. (Photo: KXTV)



WASHINGTON -- Sen. Barbara Boxer on Thursday announced a bipartisan deal to extend a transportation bill beyond Sept. 30, but said it's not clear how Congress will pay for it.

The California Democrat, who heads the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee, or EPW, and the panel's top Republican, Louisiana Sen. David Vitter, don't agree on much. But they appeared together at a Capitol Hill news conference to announce they've struck a deal to renew -- possibly for six years -- the federal law dealing with highways, bridges and public transit systems.

The agreement, which is being fleshed out, pertains to transportation policy. It won't address the fate of the Highway Trust Fund, which is projected to run dry in a few months. The trust fund is mainly made up of federal fuel taxes which haven't been increased in more than two decades.

The deal's highlights include mostly holding the line on transportation spending over the next few years except to keep pace with inflation, retaining existing programs and paying extra attention to improving rural transportation systems.

The harder job of figuring out how to pay for all of it and provide a steady revenue source for the highway fund would fall to the Senate Finance Committee and the House Ways and Means Committee, both tax-writing panels.

President Barack Obama signed a two-year, \$105 billion transportation law in July 2012. It expires on Sept. 30, when the current fiscal year ends, as does the highway fund.

Appearing alongside Boxer and Vitter on Thursday were Sen. Thomas Carper, a Delaware Democrat who heads EPW's transportation subcommittee, and Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., the subcommittee's ranking Republican.

The display of bipartisan unity was meant to "send a strong signal to this country that we . . . have worked to act across party lines before the Highway Trust Fund can (no longer) pay its bills," Boxer said.

"Seventy thousand of our bridges are structurally deficient and 50 percent of our roads are in less-than-good condition," Boxer said. "We must act and that is what we intend to do."

Vitter said the four lawmakers will soon have a "detailed outline" of the next transportation bill.

"This is nonpartisan and this is critical for all of our constituents and for our economy," he said.

Congress hasn't increased federal fuel taxes since 1993.

Advocates say that's a major reason why the highway fund is dwindling, especially given that people are driving less and vehicles are getting more fuel efficient.

The U.S. Department of Transportation says the fund will dip below \$4 billion by July -- the minimum amount the Obama administration says it needs to help states meet day-to-day expenses like paying contractors for work they've already performed.

Despite previous Democratic attempts to raise the tax, Republicans have been steadfast in their opposition. There's bipartisan agreement among advocacy groups and state and local transportation agencies that the tax is too low.

Boxer has said there's no appetite to raise the tax during this election year. But she said Thursday she's optimistic about Congress finding other ways to keep the highway fund alive.

Advocates say Congress is likely to once again transfer money from general revenue to temporarily shore up the highway fund. But Boxer said she wants to find a long-term fix to the nation's transportation problems.

"We are moving fast in order to avoid any kind of patch," she said. "We don't think a patch is good governance."