

Quincy Herald-Whig

Durbin tells Summit crowd that increase in fuel tax needed to help pay for federal highway bill

Published: 10/13/2009 | Updated: 10/21/2009

By [DOUG WILSON](#)

Herald-Whig Senior Writer

FAIRFIELD, Iowa -- U.S. Sen. Dick Durbin wants to see a federal highway bill that will send about \$90 billion a year to states for highways, bridges and other transportation needs.

"We have to pay for it, and paying for it may mean an increase in the federal gas tax. Nobody wants to say those words. I've said them to you because unless we're honest about this, we're not going to see an (adequate) federal highway bill," Durbin said during Monday's Tri-State Development Summit.

Durbin told reporters that a consensus must be reached between business, labor and community leaders to support a fuel tax increase "to stimulate new job creation in America."

The transportation plan was set to expire Oct. 1, but it has gotten a one-month extension at the current funding level. House Transportation Chairman U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, D-Minn., wants to nearly double the size to \$500 billion to catch up on crumbling infrastructure, but White House officials have suggested they want to delay work on the bill for 18 months.

Durbin said he wants to see Congress pass the bill by early next year.

U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, told Summit participants that in the long term, the United States may need to rely on more than fuel taxes to cover the costs of highways and other transportation. Grassley also said it takes coordinated federal, state and local support for key infrastructure.

He wants to see the next federal highway bill trim the number of programs, rather than setting aside money in so many different categories.

U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood recorded a DVD for the summit, calling the transportation bill a jobs program. LaHood said highway construction funded through the federal stimulus bill already has created nearly 1 million jobs.

Illinois Transportation Secretary Gary Hannig said good transportation has always brought economic development. He also pledged to help re-establish rail connections between Iowa and Chicago as part of a multi-state initiative.

Hannibal, Mo., businessman Tom Boland, a member of the Summit Steering Committee, said he is disappointed the Obama administration and some congressional leaders have tried to delay the bill. Boland pointed out several regional priorities that need funding. The Hannibal expressway is needed to fully complete the Avenue of the Saints and move through-traffic out of Hannibal streets.

"We need to get those plans on the shelf" so that when funding is available, work can proceed, Boland said.

Boland said U.S. 63 is being promoted as a four-lane "Corridor of the Capitals" between Jefferson City, Mo., and Des Moines. The only two-lane section remains between Kirksville, Mo., and Ottumwa.

U.S. 67 in Illinois still has several two-lane sections that need to be upgraded to four lanes.

Illinois capital funding will partially cover the costs of four-lane construction along U.S. 34 between Gulfport and Monmouth, Ill. Partial funding also is in place for the Macomb Bypass, which helps complete the Chicago-Kansas City Expressway.

Tom Carper, chairman of the national Amtrak Board, said the approval of \$1.3 billion in operational funds, along with \$8 billion in commitments to upgrade the rail system and buy new equipment and up to \$1 billion a year for other work, gives passenger rail a chance to plan for growth and improvements.

Amtrak released figures Monday that ridership nationally fell only slightly from the record ridership of fiscal 2008. The 27.2 million passengers paid a combined \$1.6 billion for tickets, and on-time performance improved.

-- dwilson@whig.com/221-3372