



Chamber of Commerce mobilizes behind highway bill

By Kevin Bogardus - 01/25/12 11:53 AM ET

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce launched a campaign Wednesday to push for passage of a new long-term highway bill.

The Chamber will spend roughly a half a million dollars on Web, print, radio and television ads calling for passage of the legislation that will run in Washington and at least nine states. The "Make Transportation Job #1" campaign will also include grassroots action by the Chamber and other groups.

The ramped-up lobbying effort comes as the eighth extension of the transportation-funding bill is set to expire at the end of March. Business groups have been staunch advocates for increased highway funding and said repairing the nation's crumbling infrastructure is an economic necessity.

"We have got to let members know that this is a top priority for business," Janet Kavinsky, the Chamber's executive director of transportation and infrastructure, told The Hill. "It's time to go ahead and move the bill."

The Americans for Transportation Mobility (ATM) coalition, of which Kavinsky is vice president, is releasing an open letter to Congress on Wednesday. More than 1,000 organizations, companies and local chambers have signed the letter urging lawmakers to pass a long-term highway bill.

"The long-delayed reauthorization of federal highway and public transportation programs is a major piece of unfinished business that can provide a meaningful boost to the U.S. economy and its workers and already has broad-based support," the groups wrote in their letter.

President Obama renewed his call for infrastructure spending in Tuesday's State of the Union address, telling lawmakers they need to invest in America again.

"So much of America needs to be rebuilt," Obama said. "We've got crumbling roads and bridges, a power grid that wastes too much energy, an incomplete high-speed broadband network that prevents a small business owner in rural America from selling her products all over the world."

Kavinsky said many of the goals the president outlined in his address can be helped by passage of a new highway bill.

"If you want to double exports, increase manufacturing and provide relief for the construction industry, pass a long-term transportation bill," Kavinsky said. "I listened to the president and even though he didn't connect the dots, we will do it for him."

Kavinsky said she has heard the draft House highway bill will be released soon, and a House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee aide said it will be a five-year, \$260 billion proposal. The panel is planning a markup of the bill a week from Thursday, the aide said.

"That's a great place to start," Kavinsky said. "It's important for us to now communicate to the members that this is something that has to move."

One of the biggest hurdles for the highway bill is finding a way to pay for it. The Chamber is open to an increase in the gas tax to help pay for the bill, though Kavinsky said that seems unlikely.

“Ideally, we want user fees to pay for the transportation bill, but I’m enough of a realist to know that’s not realistic at the moment,” she said.

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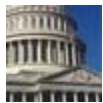
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