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Transport bill throws bones to base

By: [Adam Snider](#)

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House Republicans on Tuesday introduced a giant new [surface transportation bill](#) loaded with goodies for the GOP base.

No earmarks, drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, cutting Amtrak's budget, forcing approval of the Keystone XL pipeline and ending mandatory spending on bicycle and pedestrian paths — what's a diehard Republican not to like?

House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) and more than a dozen GOP committee members held a Tuesday press conference to sell the bill. Anybody in attendance wouldn't be blamed for thinking they walked in on a tea party rally — complete with references to the Constitution and “changing how Washington works.”

“When our freshman class came to Congress, we wanted to change how Washington worked, and this bill does exactly that,” Freshman Rep. Frank Guinta (R-N.H.) told reporters of the 800-page bill that sets federal highway and transit spending levels, reforms transportation programs, and streamlines environmental reviews.

“It's consistent with the Constitution and our duties as the federal government. It says in Article 1: national security, commerce, and build Post roads,” said Rep. Bill Shuster (R-Pa.), chairman of the railroads subcommittee.

But a Republican's treasure is a Democrat's trash.

“All of it fits into the Republican mantra of the last year and four weeks of this year,” former T&I Chairman Jim Oberstar (D-Minn.) told POLITICO. “It seems to me that fringe policymakers have hijacked the transportation bill.”

Greg Cohen, president and CEO of the American Highway Users Alliance, said it was a calculated move on the part of Republicans trying to get their base to support a massive, \$260 billion bill that doesn't cut spending.

“The key thing here is the Republican, after the tea party stuff, they really feel a need to show that they can still do big things and that they can rally around an investment of hundreds of billions of dollars. And in order to do that, they really needed it to be a big wet kiss for conservatives. And so this is their mark of what they think it should be,” Cohen said.

There were no Democrats at the press conference. Even one of the Senate's most conservative members, Environment and Public Works Committee ranking member Jim Inhofe (R-Okla.), opposes the House's use of expected oil revenues to pay for the five-year proposal.

But that won't stop House Republicans from moving forward.

“We’ve passed many good bills in the House that aren’t going anywhere in the Senate, but I think this is a bill that we can pass in both the House and the Senate,” said Highways and Transit Subcommittee Chairman John Duncan (R-Tenn.).

But Duncan had a warning: “This is a big bill with controversial items so nobody gets everything they want in a bill like this.”

The Natural Resources Committee will mark up the drilling sections of the bill Wednesday; the Transportation and Infrastructure panel has a markup set for Thursday. Mica said that session could last so long that he suggested reporters plan ahead.

“So if you have trouble seeing up there in those august galleries in the press, get some hemorrhoid ointment and hang on,” Mica said at Tuesday’s press conference.

Darren Goode contributed to this report.

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