

# THE HILL



## **GOP goes on offense with \$260B highway bill**

By Keith Laing - 01/31/12 06:50 PM ET

House Republicans teed up an election-year battle over jobs Tuesday, unveiling a \$260 billion transportation bill designed to put Democrats on the defensive.

The package from House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman John Mica (R-Fla.) would spend \$260 billion over five years on road and transit projects — funding that Democrats and President Obama have long championed as stimulus for the economy.

But the GOP bill would pay for some of the transportation work with an expansion of oil and gas drilling, including in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge (ANWR), a nonstarter for many Democrats and their supporters in the environmental movement.

Sensing an advantage, Mica on Tuesday warned Democrats the bill is the only vehicle for highway funding that Republicans would support.

"This is the only piece of legislation" that can pass the House, Mica said at a press conference in front of the Capitol.

"This is a major start," he said. "Look where we've been, and look where we are today."

Republicans also touted the bill as a job creator as they make the case that obstruction by Senate Democrats is standing in the way of legislation that would help the economy.

"This bill will put Americans back to work rebuilding our roads and bridges and developing new sources of low-cost energy," Mica said in a statement. "This legislation may be the most important jobs measure to pass Congress this year."

Transportation and business groups have been pushing Congress for years to approve a multi-year appropriations bill for transportation and infrastructure. The last funding bill expired in 2009.

But advocates on Tuesday expressed reservations with Mica's revised proposal.

"Certainly we are happy the House and Senate are opening a discussion, but there's a lot of work to be done," said Edward Wytkind, the president of the AFL-CIO's transportation trades department.

Wytkind lamented the vast differences between the version of the highway bill that was unveiled by Mica on Thursday and the proposal that has begun moving in the Senate.

In the past, "they have always moved these bills as a 'Big Four' authorizations," he said, referring to the chairman and ranking members of the respective transportation committees in the Senate.

"They moved them as impenetrable, avoided ideological fights and increased the funding so that the next authorization would always be higher than the last one," Wytkind said.

The Senate's version of the transportation bill is shorter, but it appropriates more money for road projects annually. The upper chamber has proposed spending \$109 billion per year on the new highway bill, and its version of the legislation relies more on traditional sources of funding, such as the gas tax.

Mica defended the highway bill as a team effort and told reporters to pack a lunch Thursday because he plans to allow amendments during the markup of the bill — a process that could drag on for days.

"Everybody needs to find a way to fund these things," Mica said.

The plan to pay for highways with drilling has riled up environmental groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). The New York-based group argued Tuesday that not only is linking highway spending to oil drilling bad for the environment, it also imperils the bill's prospects for being approved by the Democratically controlled Senate.

"Instead of going the bipartisan route taken by the Senate, House Republican leaders have loaded the bill with environmental protection rollbacks, extreme measures that mandate oil drilling just about everywhere and a permit for the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline," NRDC President Frances Beinecke said in a statement.

"The American people need a transportation bill; this bill will prevent them from getting one."

Another provision of the GOP proposal that drew criticism Tuesday was a provision that would increase the weight of trucks allowed on highways from 80,000 to 97,000 pounds.

"Americans don't want 97,000-pound trucks or huge multi-trailers up to 120 feet long on our nation's highways," the lobbying group for a competing method of shipping, the Association of American Railroads, said in a statement. "Nor is it fair that even more of the public's tax dollars will be used to pay for the road and bridge damage inflicted by massive trucks."

The Coalition for Transportation Productivity, which argues the other side of the truck weight issue, was more enthusiastic about the House highway bill proposal.

"The American Energy and Infrastructure Jobs Act recognizes that states need the ability to create safer, greener, more efficient shipping on their interstate highways," CTP Executive Director John Runyan said in a statement.

"Truck capacity has dropped by 16 percent since the recession started, and the 30-year-old federal vehicle weight limit compounds the problem by forcing many trucks to travel when they are only partially full," he continued.

For his part, Mica stressed Tuesday that the bill he unveiled "wasn't final."

"I tried to do everything I could ... to work with everyone," he said

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**crosmersd** 12 hours ago

Drilling for more oil WILL NOT get us out of a traffic jam NOR fix our roads! We need to improve our public transit systems, bus and rail, as well as the air service, too. The heavier trucks will render our current highway system obsolete. And also the highway funds should NOT be spent on building all of those ugly sound barriers so wealthy people in gated communities won't have their beauty sleep disrupted; what a waste, and a great target for graffiti artists!

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**crosmersd** 12 hours ago

I drive a truck and wonder what kind of pills Mica is popping lately. His proposal will decimate our transportation system at the expense of protecting the interests of anybody who drives a car or needs more oil to play around with gasoline powered toys. If this assesses the costs of gas savings will be sucked up later when time comes to pay the piper for bridge and road repairs. Sure, make the trucking industry pay for it? You better be ready to pay more for everything you buy at the store, including on line!

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