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Thursday, Jul. 17, 2014



Guest columnist

Layne: Averting a transportation crisis

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Posted: Thursday, July 17, 2014 12:00 am

Aubrey L. Layne Jr.

The clock is ticking toward a dire situation for the nation's transportation program. Come Aug. 1 of this year, the most critical funding source to repair and build roads and bridges and to keep public transportation moving across the country is at risk of drying up. The federal Highway Trust Fund is running on empty. If Congress does not act soon to address the budget shortfall, Virginia — among other states in the nation — faces serious consequences of shutting projects down.

Of the \$2.1 billion in revenues available in fiscal year 2015 for transportation capital improvements in Virginia, more than half comes from the federal government. In Virginia we expect the following consequences of not shoring up the Highway Trust Fund for FY 2015 alone:

- 149 bridge replacements will not happen;

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Ryan McDougle

When General Assembly sessions come to an end, a period of reaction and analysis begins. Lawmakers on both sides of controversial issues

- 44 smaller transit systems, mostly in rural Virginia, will not have the funds to continue running;
- More than 350 other projects will grind to a halt; and
- 175 transit vehicles will not be replaced.

This outcome will impact more than 43,000 jobs across Virginia and significantly more across the country. And these effects would grow worse over time.

In addition to these direct impacts, many states, including Virginia, have taken advantage of the tools provided by Congress to help advance large-scale projects through bonding backed by federal revenues. These bonds, known as GARVEE (Grant Anticipation Revenue Vehicles), are sold by a state and are to be paid back through future federal apportionments. If those apportionments are not provided, then states are faced with the tough choice of canceling other projects to redirect state revenues to pay debt service or defaulting on the bonds. States entered into these arrangements based on an understanding that future federal funds would be available.

Virginia has suspended selling GARVEE bonds because we don't know when or if we would be reimbursed by federal funding sources.

Regarding Virginia's highway construction program, summer and warm-weather months are the prime time to get the work done. The Virginia Department of Transportation will not slow down the construction until the last minute. The work includes rehabilitating bridges and roads and improving capacity to reduce congestion. These projects are essential to keep our road system safe and move traffic and commerce efficiently. The cost of stopping and starting is substantial and should be avoided.

VDOT can keep construction workers on the job for about 90 days, provided there is the promise of eventual federal reimbursement. If there is no substantial movement by Congress in the next 60 days, we may have to curtail the program. Every project that receives federal funding is at risk of being impacted. This has a profound result we don't want to experience because it will slow business and Virginia down, creating negative effects for commerce, motorists and our quality of life.

A significant infusion of revenue to the Highway Trust Fund is necessary to avert negative balances in the near future. My plea to Congress is to come up with a reliable and sustainable source of transportation funding to take care of needs well into the future.

Last year, Virginia was able to develop a sustainable transportation funding program with state dollars. The General Assembly reached common ground to do what is best for Virginia's transportation system. This year, Gov. Terry McAuliffe signed into law House Bill 2 to ensure the new funding is invested in the right projects based on an objective and measured prioritization process.

While states like Virginia are stepping up and raising revenues, we can only do so much on our own. States, metropolitan planning organizations and transit agencies need a strong and reliable federal partner to help meet transportation needs like



attempt to claim victory for the success of some legislative initiatives or the defeat of others.

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repairing infrastructure and reducing congestion.

The solutions to the federal surface transportation needs must address all modes of surface transportation — highways, transit and rail. Congress should find ways to increase and stabilize funding for key programs like Amtrak, the TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grant program and the New Starts transit program.

There needs to be discussion about growth in the program. While it is promising that the House voted Tuesday on a temporary fix to shore up the trust fund, patching the hole is only a short-term solution. For the past several years, Congress has patched the trust fund to get by, when a total rehabilitation is needed.

My hope is that by the end of this month, there will be a federal funding plan in place to preserve the public's highways and transportation system for the sake of our ability to travel safely and the country's economic survival. Congress may take a recess, but the funding of the federal Highway Trust Fund should not.

Aubrey L. Layne Jr. is Virginia's secretary of

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Doug Riddell · Top Commenter

Congress won't raise the cost of a gallon of gas by a couple of pennies for the first time in a couple of decades because members are scared to death to be charged with "raising taxes" by a potential opponent in an election, yet gasoline companies raise (and lower) the price of a gallon of gas five to ten cents overnight and drivers pay no attention to such prices shifts other than to grin and bear it. What's wrong with this picture? Our transportation infrastructure is crumbling because we have [supposed] leaders who don't have the backbone to cast a ballot for a simple fix that would hardly be noticed.

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Cut defense and pu t some more money towards transportation- including passenger rail!

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Scott Sirles · Top Commenter · Richmond, Virginia

The problem with the Federal Highway Trust Fund is it's funding source, Federal fuel taxes, is rapidly becoming obsolete. If the reason for the obsolescence were only better gasoline mileage, then raising the tax would fix the problem. Battery and other non-gasoline vehicles as well as changing attitudes about auto transportation are the main drivers of obsolescence. Short of injecting itself in States' vehicle inspection systems where mileage is captured and States' vehicle registration systems where vehicle weight is captured, the Federal government has no method of rescuing its user fee based revenue collection system.

Consequently, I think that Secretary Layne is complaining about a problem that the Federal government is powerless to solve in any way other than abandoning the Federal tax and funding the Trust Fund from income tax revenue. General revenue funding, of course, introduces huge cross subsidies and perverse incentives to consume transportation resources. In fact, it may be time to abandon Federal transportation funding and allow states to assume this responsibility.

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