



THE PLAIN DEALER

Highway fund rescue also saves Ohio jobs

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Jim Abrams

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Washington - Congress on Thursday sent President Bush an \$8 billion rescue package for the federal highway trust fund. The infusion comes as the trust fund, which relies on declining revenue from the federal gas tax, verges on going broke, threatening road and bridge projects in every state.

The House passed the measure on a 376-29 vote Thursday, a day after the Senate overcame objections from conservative senators and passed it on a voice vote. The legislation transfers \$8 billion from the Treasury's general fund to the highway fund, ensuring that construction projects won't be interrupted.

The measure will prevent Ohio from losing \$351 million in highway funding, said Rep. Steve LaTourette, Republican of Concord Township. The shortfall could have cost the state more than 12,000 jobs, LaTourette said.

Only three Ohioans voted against the measure: Republicans David Hobson of Springfield, Steve Chabot of Cincinnati and Jim Jordan of Mansfield. Two Ohioans missed the vote: Deborah Pryce of Columbus and Jean Schmidt of Clermont County.

The White House had previously threatened to veto the measure, calling it "both a gimmick and a dangerous precedent that shifts costs from users to taxpayers at large."

But the administration shifted positions after Transportation Secretary Mary Peters last week revealed that the trust fund would run out of money this month, which would delay payments to states for infrastructure projects and threaten the jobs of hundreds of thousands of construction workers.

"We must act," said Rep. John Lewis, a Georgia Democrat. "The trust fund is broke, out of money. Our state and local governments, drivers, construction workers and many others suffer when highway projects are delayed." He and others pointed out that in 1998 the government moved \$8 billion from the trust fund, then enjoying a large surplus, to the general fund for deficit reduction, and that this measure returned borrowed money.

It has long been anticipated that the 52-year-old trust fund would move into the red next year, a result of the reluctance of Congress to raise the gas tax.

Plain Dealer bureau chief Stephen Koff contributed to this story.

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