

Congressional Priorities: Out of Whack

The news out of Capitol Hill this past summer has not only been sobering, it has made many in community transportation question the 104th Congress' priorities.

How else to react to House and Senate transit appropriations bills that cut significantly from public transit, including a 16 percent slash in formula funding, while increasing highway spending by more than \$500 million?

Perhaps more troubling, though, is the way these cuts, which are supposedly across the board will most harshly affect small-urban, rural and specialized transit operators. And in the midst of all these funding cuts, officials at HHS have effectively driven a wedge through many human services transportation coordination efforts with ill-advised new Head Start transportation regulations.

Clearly, these are tough times for public transportation. Here's a quick refresher on some of the news out of Washington, D.C. recently:

Congress to Cut Transit, Increase Highway Spending

Congress began its budgeting process earlier this year with cutting on its collective mind. The budget, many argued, was simply too large; cuts had to be made to lessen the deficit. Fine. But why is highway funding held above the fray?

Congress voted to take vital transportation services away from the elderly, from people with disabilities and from people with few mobility choices, opting, instead, to fund more highways for those of us with personal automobiles.

And how much is really saved by the proposed cuts on public transportation and is it worth isolating many Americans? Less than \$26 million nationally will be saved by the proposed cuts in Section 18, although reducing the program by 20 percent will have a devastating impact on many rural public transit operations.

Similarly, proposed cutbacks in Section 16 specialized transportation funding will yield just \$8 million in total budget savings. Of the \$310 million proposed reduction in urban transit operating assistance, only \$54 million will be realized from transit systems in cities with populations of less than 200,000, although the 44 percent cut would be catastrophic to these agencies.

Congress Approves Transit Funding Cuts Across the Board

But wait a second, across-the-board funding cuts are not as equitable as they seem. First, community transportation operations rely more heavily on meager Section 18 and Section 16 money than do their urban counterparts on Section 9.

Second, proposed cut backs on human services transportation programs like Medicaid and the Older Americans Act, when combined with FTA funding cuts, create a one-two punch that seriously threatens the health of many smaller agencies.

New Rail Starts Increased by 3 Percent

The only line item in the transit appropriations bill that both the Senate and House saw fit to boost from last year was New Rail Starts. Coincidentally, nothing creates better press and attention for a member of congress than an expensive new subway or light-rail project back home in the district. And this from a Congress that was going to change business as usual politics and be more responsible.

HHS Proposes to Mandate Yellow School Buses for Head Start Program

Speaking of the aforementioned one-two punch, how about HHS's proposed Head Start regulations. On the one hand, Head Start agencies are asked to live with significant budget reductions; while on the other, these agencies are asked to scrap all of their current transportation efforts and purchase more expensive yellow school buses exclusively.

These proposed regulations would also effectively crush efforts to coordinate transportation services in many areas. The days of five different vehicles from five different human services agencies running virtually empty down the same streets at the same time could unfortunately continue.

Coordination, of course, is a concept that, if implemented properly, could increase the availability of transit services to an entire community without increasing costs. The elderly, people with disabilities, children, poor people, commuters and more would all benefit. An in a budget slashing climate such as today, coordination seems to make such common sense. But rules like these proposed by HHS drive a stake through coordination efforts.

Not all of the news was bad. The Senate Appropriations Committee, in response to CTAA members, halved the House's proposed small-urban transit operating funding cut from 44 percent to 20 percent. Operating funds are critical to small-urban transit operators.

Also, the Senate proposed less drastic cuts to Section 18, Section 16 and the Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP). The bottom line, however, is to expect cuts in all transit funding programs.

We understand that cuts need to be made to get our country's financial future in order. But we must make funding cuts thoughtful and only after carefully weighing all options. How wise is it, for example, to be cutting transportation drastically at a time when many human services programs are threatened? How will people without access to a personal automobile get to job training and employment, medical services and more?