It’s that time of year, when Congress should be working on its must-pass annual spending measures. To get the transit ball rolling, the House Appropriations subcommittee for Transportation, Housing and Urban Development, and related agencies (i.e., THUD Appropriations) released its initial draft FY 2021 spending bill on July 7. Everything in this draft bill is subject to change, and there are almost sure to be moments of legislative suspense in a couple months, when the fiscal year begins on October 1. After all, that’s in the middle of what’s likely to be a high-energy campaign season, full of competing policy issues having little to do with transit; plus, we have no idea about how the current COVID-19 pandemic will be affecting the country’s health and economic status this fall.

With those caveats in mind, let’s just say that the House THUD appropriations panel is drafting a bill that would increase federal transit spending more than 50 percent, and would eliminate the requirement for non-federal matching funds in FTA formula grant programs for the year. Just remember not to take any of these dollar amounts to the bank until there’s a bill that the president has signed into law, after which FTA will have made its formula funding apportionments.

Here are the transit highlights in the draft House THUD appropriations bill:

- Overall spending from the Mass Transit Account for FTA formula grants would be $16.6 billion (a somewhat staggering 53.7 percent increase from this year’s level of $10.8 billion).
- All FTA formula grant funding in FY 2021 would be at a 100 percent federal share, requiring no state or local match.
- In addition, there would be $510.0 million in FTA spending from general federal revenues; that’s the same bottom line as Congress’ general revenue appropriation in FY 2020. Those funds also would be appropriated with a 100 percent federal share.
- There’d be a $7 million appropriation from general revenues for technical assistance, added to FTA’s other technical assistance programs; this is an increase from the $5 million similarly appropriated in FY 2020.
- The Section 5309 Capital Investment Grants program would receive $2.2 billion in FY 2021, a modest increase from this year’s funding level of $2.0 billion.

Within that $510 that would be appropriated as “plus-ups” to FTA programs, here’s what the House is set to propose:
1. $374.0 million would be added to the Section 5339(b) program of competitive grants for buses and bus facilities (up from this year’s addition of $338.0 million to Section 5339, which went to both the formula-based and competitively selected pools of bus and bus facilities funds);

2. $125.0 million would be added to the “Low/No Emission” category of bus and bus facilities grants, compared to the $75.0 that was added to this category in FY 2020;

3. $10.0 million would be added to the Section 5307(h) ferry program, which did not receive such a supplement in FY 2020; and

4. $1.0 million would be a supplement for FTA’s innovative mobility grants (in contrast to this year’s innovative mobility supplement of $5.5 million).

Over the next few months, expect a lot of debate, counterproposal and compromise over those general revenue appropriations to FTA. In all likelihood, the bottom line amount of $510.0 million probably will remain, but the details are subject to all manner of change, especially when this bill – or its successor – is negotiated between House and Senate prior to final passage and enactment.