



Walz irked by stall on roads bill

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— The roadblocks facing Congressman Tim Walz, who was in St. Peter Friday pushing to get a stalled \$450 billion transportation bill moving, include President Barack Obama, the U.S. Senate and the perception that the federal government is out of money and overwhelmed by more immediate problems.

“When it comes to the White House and the Senate — that they’re opposed to this — it’s going to be a bit of a (heavy) lift,” Walz said.

But the Mankato Democrat thinks there’s plenty of fuel for his suggestion that Congress get to work now on a new transportation bill — which was technically supposed to be debated, passed and in place by Oct. 1. Walz pointed to the need for construction jobs, the importance of improved roads and other infrastructure to the nation’s economic competitiveness and the potential for a more efficient federal transportation system. Mainly, though, Walz pointed to the coalition gathered around him at St. Peter’s public works garage, saying he was attempting “to send a strong message of a unified front.”

The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce was present, as were union officials and state and local government representatives. A similar group will be with Walz on Monday in Rochester for a southeastern Minnesota version of Friday’s event.

Jeremy Estumson, the government affairs director for the chamber, said the Obama administration is making a mistake in calling for an 18-month extension of the current roads bill — delaying the changes and some of the funding that would come with a new six-year transportation authorization bill.

“That could create real competitiveness issues in the state of Minnesota,” Estumson said.

Lee Hiller, surrounded by unemployed construction workers from Local 49 of the International Union of Operating Engineers, said his union also prefers that Congress get to work on a new bill so union workers can find jobs on newly funded road and bridge projects.

“We just need to get to work,” Hiller said, suggesting that the pain of unemployment is broadly felt. “You see us guys standing here, but it’s our families too.”

Jim Swanson, the district engineer for the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s Mankato-based District 7, said a new federal authorization bill would eliminate uncertainty for state transportation departments about future funding. It would also increase construction spending and aim money at critical projects beyond roads and bridges.

And Swanson suggested there’s no better place to focus dollars when job creation is needed during an economic recession.

“The infrastructure is a great place for that to happen because it’s so important,” he said.

Rep. Terry Morrow, DFL-St. Peter, said the presence of such diverse groups indicates that transportation funding has broad support.

“This picture tells us that transportation is a nonpartisan issue,” Morrow said, gesturing to the men at the press conference. “This picture tells us that it’s important that we act now.”

The Obama administration’s preference for a delay appears to be a reaction to the criticism that the president has taken on so much in his first 10 months in office. A massive economic stimulus bill, plus the automakers rescue, cost nearly \$1 trillion; the 10-year cost of the proposed health care reform is expected to approach that figure; and a similarly ambitious national energy policy overhaul looms on the horizon.

The House indicated its preference to act more quickly by passing just a three-month extension of current transportation law. Walz said the events he’s organized urging quick action on a new six-year transportation

plan are aimed in part at persuading Minnesota's senators to oppose an 18-month delay and to persuade fellow senators of the same.

Walz is a member of the House transportation committee, which is chaired by fellow Minnesota Congressman Jim Oberstar. The committee is poised to enact the biggest overhaul of the federal transportation department, according to Walz, who said it will bring about efficiencies that will save billions of dollars and get projects from the concept stage to construction in a third of the time — or less — than it takes now.

Doing a transportation bill soon will send the message that the federal government is still doing the work that has wide public support, he said.

“That’s where I think they’re making a mistake,” Walz said of the Obama administration’s desire to delay authorization of federal spending on transportation. “... It’s not going to AIG. It’s going to Highway 14.”

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