8-14-1998

TEA-21 Surrogate Stump Speech

Max S. Baucus

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August-1998

TEA-21 SURROGATE STUMP SPEECH

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08/14/1998
TEA-21 —Surrogate Stump Speech

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to visit with you today. My name is [Name] and I serve as the [Position] in the [Office] of Senator Baucus. As you know, Max is the ranking member of the Senate Committee that has jurisdiction over highways, the Committee on the Environment and Public Works. In that capacity, he has played a leadership role in the development of each of the last two highway bills passed by the Congress. Max asked me to talk to you today in order to give you an overview of the legislation and to field any questions you might have.

Let me start with a bit of background. Every six years, the Congress authorizes a measure to provide long-term funding for highway projects across the country. This measure provides for the collection and distribution of federal gas tax money each of us pays at the pump every time we fill-up the tank.

In 1990, Congress passed the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Efficiency Act or ISTEA. Under ISTEA, Montana received 162 million per year for the six years covered under the bill. That was a good deal. For every dollar we paid in gas taxes we got about $2.61 back from the federal government to spend on Montana highways.

As you can imagine, states like Texas and other southern states didn't take too kindly to re-directing their gas tax money to rural states like Montana and they set out in 1997 when it became time to reauthorize ISTEA, to, in their view, level the playing field.

The fact of the matter is, while states like Montana have smaller populations than urban states, our highway needs are more significant. Look at it this way. Who should get more highway money, Rhode Island which has 70 miles of interstate, or Montana which has nearly 2,000 miles of interstate highway?

Montana of course, but as I mentioned not everyone in Congress saw it that way.

In fact, the bill passed by the House would have been a disaster for Montana. Under that measure, Montana would have received some $80 million dollars less per year than under the version Max coauthored and helped pass through the Senate. That would have meant thousands of fewer jobs and a serious decline in our state's infrastructure.

As a member of the Senate-House conference committee on this legislation, Max definitely had his work cut out for him. He went to the bargaining table intent on educating his colleagues about the special needs of rural states like Montana, where safe and efficient transportation is critical to our livelihood. Moreover, he wanted to show them that we could afford to recognize these special needs without either busting the budget or seriously hurting more urban states.
I'm pleased to report that a lot of hard work paid off. And the result is a bill that does a great deal to help meet the transportation needs of rural states like Montana. Under the final bill, the Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century, or TEA-21, Montana will receive an average of $260 million a year for each of the next six years. That's a 60% increase over the last six-year period covered under the previous highway funding bill passed in 1991! And the money is guaranteed. No one can take it away from us.

That money translates into some 11,000 good-paying jobs right here at home for Montana workers. And that means more people are going to be able to establish a strong foundation on which to build a bright future.

In addition, the bill we passed by the Congress on May 22nd and signed into law by the President, recognizes the importance of access to our public lands by authorizing the expenditure of roughly $4 billion nationally over the six-year period to improve existing roads that provide access to federal lands we use for recreating with our families and enjoying the outdoors.

Another important provision Max worked hard to get into the final bill was funding to provide for the efficient reconstruction of one of Montana's most scenic highways: the stunningly beautiful Beartooth Highway running between Red Lodge and Yellowstone National Park. This bill earmarks $19.9 million dollars -- in addition to the $12 million we authorized late last year in the New World Mine buyout agreement -- to allow substantial work to be done to make this well-traveled highway safer for all of us and our visitors. Red Lodge folks know how important that highway is to their community. And highway maintenance crew members there know how important it is to ensure that the highway remains safe for drivers and passengers from all over the world.

On balance, it was helpful that Max was at the bargaining table to help work out an agreement on this landmark legislation. There were a lot of late nights, and the participants had their share of heated arguments. Through it all, though, Max's main concern was how to craft a bill that was going to treat Montana fairly without busting the budget. By all accounts those goals were accomplished and accomplished well. The final bill passed both the Senate and House with broad bipartisan support and the unanimous support of the Montana delegation. The final bill will be a real shot in the arm for Montana and the country. It puts people to work, makes our highways better and safer, and ensures that Montana can compete in the 21st century.

Roads make up the web that connects every Montana town with every other Montana town: farmers taking their produce to market; businessmen and women delivering their products to Main Street; tourists traveling to Montana's unsurpassed
natural wonders; and family members coming home for the holidays. Whether for business or pleasure, we all rely on roads. They help us maintain the quality of life that makes Montana the “Last Best Place.”

So, when the construction worker waves you on and you start driving again on a new section of highway, we hope you agree that it was well worth the wait.

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