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Talking Points on Transportation Appropriations Bill

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September-1999

Talking Points on Transportation Appropriations Bill

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09/01/1999
Talking Points on Transportation Appropriations bill

♦ Last week we all stood together to defend our colleagues in California and New York against a proposal from Senator Shelby to rewrite the TEA-21 formula for transit and thereby greatly reduce their legitimate share of transit funding. I was pleased to join with them, not only because of the politics, but more importantly, because it was the right thing to do.

♦ Senator Shelby got the message and announced that he would remove the offending provision from the Transportation bill. But he solved only part of the problem.

♦ As you know from my comments last week, the bill also contains a revision in the formula that distributes a portion of the highway funds. These funds, known as “RABA”, result from the greater than expected revenues going into the Highway Trust Fund. This year, it amounts to slightly over $1.4 billion.

♦ Last year’s highway bill staked out new ground by putting into law the requirement that all gas tax revenues be devoted to highways. Some of the members in this room were instrumental in achieving that goal, particularly Senator Byrd.

♦ Now I don’t have to remind you of the difficult debates we had over funding formulas among the three main groups, northeast states, donor states, and western states. But in the end, we achieved a bill that was supported by 89 Senators. Only one Democrat voted against the conference report. So the final result, while probably not what any of us would have written ourselves, was a good compromise and was broadly supported.

♦ Now, only a year after we overwhelmingly passed TEA-21, Sen. Shelby has rewritten a part of the highway funding formula. What he has done is taken about $100 million in funding for highway research, intelligent transportation, public lands, and other so-called allocated programs, and distributed this money instead to the states. And all this without the benefit of any hearings or even any demonstrated problem with the TEA-21 formula.

♦ You might ask why Baucus is going after a provision that would give ALL states a little more money. Has he lost his senses? Does he have a death wish? I’ll tell you it’s because I see this as the first step down the road to a serious policy problem but an even bigger political problem next year.

♦ While this new formula involves relatively little money, it is the start of a more dangerous process. Highway bills are six year authorizations for a very good reason. Highways take time to plan design and build. Our state highway departments need some level of certainty about future funding levels to plan properly. I’ve followed closely what Montana is doing to plan and I can tell you than a stable funding picture is absolutely vital. Without it, highway and transit projects will proceed more slowly, as will the construction jobs and economic activity that they bring with them.
So while it involves relatively little money this year, who’s to say how much will be involved next year? And the year after that? So rewriting highway funding formulas in an annual appropriations bill could well jeopardize a major element in our highway program and that is predictable funding.

But my big worry is what this could bring next year for Democrats. If we turn the highway funding formula into an annual political grab bag, then we know who holds the purse strings — the majority. And while 50 states got more money this time, what if only 40 states benefit next year? And what if those 10 losing states happen to be states with Democrats running?

I’m certainly not trying to take politics out of highway funding or appropriations. But I don’t want us to go down a path that could jeopardize Democrats next year, or in years after that. Why would we want to put ourselves at the mercy of a majority that already demonstrated on the transit issue that they will use funding formulas against Democrats?

It true that all states will benefit from this funding change, this year. But I ask you to take a longer look ahead and consider what situation we’ll face next year as they try to protect their majority status. I don’t think we should be complicit in a scheme to give them that added leverage over us.

And for those of you who care about process, this change in the formula, is not within the jurisdiction of the Appropriations Committee. It is, in fact, legislation on an appropriations bill, subject to Rule 16. And while I’ve worked well with my colleagues on the Appropriations Committee over the years, this is one time when I have to protect the authorizing committee’s jurisdiction.

Some of you may know that the Administration’s budget this year also proposed a change in the formula for distributing the RABA funds. I said at the time that that was a mistake, that the highway bill was not just a year old and that such changes were improper. So I lay part of the blame for opening the door on this at the Administration’s doorstep. But I would urge us not to walk through that door. We’ll only regret it at Democrats later on.