

National transportation fund is running on empty

By Ray Lahood And Ed Rendell

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The cost of just about everything over the past 21 years has gone up. In 1993, you would have paid on average \$12 to go see Hall of Famer Robin Yount catch a fly ball. Today, if you wanted to go see [Carlos Gomez](#) hit one out of the park, it would set you back \$24. The cost of a first-class stamp has risen from 29 cents to 49 cents. One of the few things that has not changed one penny is the nation's 18.4 cent per gallon gas tax. In inflation-adjusted terms, the gas tax has lost a third of its purchasing power and is worth only 11.5 cents today.

This is not just a lesson about inflation. This is important because the federal gas tax is the only revenue source for the [Highway Trust Fund](#), which maintains our nation's roads and bridges.

Wisconsin, like most other states, cannot go it alone when it comes to maintaining and modernizing its roads, bridges and transit systems. The state depends on federal funding for just over half of its transportation budget. But this once-reliable source of funding is in danger of drying up if Congress does not act. Here's why.

Over the past 21 years, cars have become much more fuel-efficient, and hybrids and electric vehicles that use little or no gas are on the rise. Between more fuel-efficient cars and a gas tax that is limping along, the Highway Trust Fund is running on empty.

Without a continuation of federal transportation funds, important projects such as the Zoo Interchange in Milwaukee County and the reconstruction of U.S. Highway 41 in Brown County may not move forward.

The law that authorizes and funds national transportation policy will expire on Sept. 30. But the Highway Trust Fund is projected to run dry sometime in August. It sounds crazy that our Highway Trust Fund could go bankrupt, and we won't be able to pay to repair our roads and bridges. But unless Congress acts, this is exactly what will happen.

To prevent insolvency, Congress must inject new revenue into the trust fund. Failure to do so would curtail critical construction projects and would kill tens of thousands of middle-class construction jobs, potentially during the peak summer construction season.

That would be terrible for our economy, which is just getting back on its feet. And it would have direct consequences in Wisconsin as the state could lose \$826 million in federal transportation funding, 13,130 jobs and affect 180 projects.

The nonpartisan [Congressional Budget Office](#) has estimated that the Highway Trust Fund needs an additional \$15 billion in revenue to stay afloat just for another year. Congress could stave off this crisis by increasing revenue to the trust fund through a modest 10-cent increase in the gasoline tax. Such an increase would generate the \$15 billion needed to sustain the trust fund for another year. During that time, Congress could move forward with reforming the corporate tax code, which has been proposed by President Barack Obama and the Republican chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, Dave Camp. Both recommended that a portion of the revenue derived from corporate tax reform be directed to the trust fund, which would keep it flush for another 10 years.

As former elected officials, we fully understand the difficult politics of raising revenue. But while policy-makers in Congress sit on their hands and the Highway Trust Fund runs on fumes, governors and local officials have been making the tough decisions and, in some cases, raising money to address their local transportation challenges.

Gov. Scott Walker knows how important smart infrastructure investments are to economic growth and job creation. During his "state of the state" address earlier this year, he said: "Good roads and bridges and freight rail and ports and transit and airports are important to more than just construction workers; they are vital to a thriving economy. All sorts of industries rely on a strong transportation system: manufacturers, farmers, miners, loggers, retailers and many others."

Our colleagues in state governments are making tough decisions, but Congress always seems to wait for a crisis to reach a boiling point before it acts. If Congress waits much longer, it runs the risk that the Highway Trust Fund will go bankrupt. Americans don't need more government gridlock; we need Congress to work together for the sake of our economy and the jobs that transportation funding provides.

Congress should act immediately to keep the Highway Trust Fund from going bankrupt. The years of kicking the can down the pothole-filled road must end. Congress needs to make a real and sustainable long-term fix for funding America's transportation system. The economic prosperity of our nation and that of Wisconsin depends upon it.

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