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Dave Efaw: Transportation cuts hurt future W.Va. economy

Transportation infrastructure -- our roads and bridges, water, rail and air services -- allow us to live where we chose and helps our families get to work and school safely. Infrastructure also creates jobs by allowing the goods and services produced here to be sold throughout the world.

The men and women of West Virginia's building trades have helped assemble and maintain this vital piece of our everyday lives for decades.

But we are concerned about the future of our state's transportation infrastructure.

With our national transportation law and funding set to expire at the end of September, the House and Senate have put forward conflicting proposals to guide America's transportation investments into the future.

Constrained by the Ryan budget, Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., has developed a partisan House plan that cuts federal transportation funding by roughly one-third and locks in that low level of investment over the next six years. While still lacking many details, Sen. Barbara Boxer's, D-Calif., competing proposal, which was developed in bipartisan negotiations, maintains current funding levels plus inflation for the next two years.

For construction workers, the difference between these two proposals is enormous. Overall, the construction sector was the hardest hit in this recession. The estimated \$141 million decrease in Federal Transportation funds for West Virginia could mean the loss of nearly 5,000 jobs for projects in our state in 2012 and more than a half-million jobs nationwide. Cutting these jobs would further hurt already struggling construction workers.

As bad as massive job losses are, the bigger worry is for our long-term prosperity and our state's business climate. Businesses need well-maintained transportation infrastructure to grow more jobs in other sectors of our state's economy. The job-killing Mica proposal takes us in the wrong direction, it harms something much bigger than just badly needed construction jobs -- it damages our nation's ability to recover and prosper.

We need to repair and maintain what we've already got. More than 16 percent of West Virginia's bridges and one in nine of our nation's bridges are structurally deficient. Too many of our roads -- and close to half of roadways nationwide -- are not in good condition. Potholes on poorly maintained roads cost each driver \$335 on average per year. Since \$1 in upfront road repairs can save as much as \$14 in repairs in the future, failure to keep up with maintenance could saddle our children and grandchildren with enormous debt in the form of a crumbling infrastructure. Mica's proposal has neither the funding nor the accountability measures to ensure we succeed.

Representative Nick Rahall, who sits on the House Transportation Committee, has come out strongly against the proposed cuts in transportation funding and in support for a two-year plan that keeps federal support at current levels. We hope the rest of our state delegation will support Rahall's position.

When Senate legislation is introduced, our Senators Jay Rockefeller and Joe Manchin will have a chance to lead the way to a bill for the 21st century that can win bipartisan support, by setting clear priorities, holding agencies accountable for smart and timely decisions, and making smart plans that help our tax dollars go further. If Congress can develop the right bill, tradesmen stand ready to do our part in building a 21st-century America.

Efaw is secretary/treasurer of the West Virginia State Building and Construction Trades Council, AFL-CIO.