END OF THE ROAD: The Case Against the Highway Trust Fund

By “Coach Vance” Trefethen

***"Resolved: The United States federal government should substantially reform its transportation policy."***

The federal Highway Trust Fund (HTF) is a pot of money funded by federal excise taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel. Congress allocates monies from the HTF as grants back to state and local governments to pay for road construction (and some percentage also goes to subsidizing mass transit). This case argues that this is an inefficient way to pay for roads, since cycling the money through Washington adds no value and creates a lot of problems.

Since the States perceive it as “free” money, they sometimes use it for projects that they would never think worthy if they had to tax their own citizens and pay for it themselves. And the “trust fund” isn’t really accomplishing its mission anyway: Congress routinely overspends the budget and ends up having to borrow deficit dollars to cover what was supposed to be entirely covered by taxes on people who use the roads. Turning highway funding responsibility back to the states would be the best option for taxpayers and road users. States could raise their own gas taxes if they think they need more roads, and construct only the roads they need and are willing to pay for.

END OF THE ROAD: The Case Against the Highway Trust Fund 3

OBSERVATION 1. We offer the following DEFINITIONS. 3

OBSERVATION 2. INHERENCY, or the structure of the Status Quo. 3

FACT 1. The Highway Trust Fund. Federal surface transportation infrastructure is funded by the HTF 3

FACT 2. Deficit financing. Dedicated taxes aren’t enough, so Congress shifts billions from general revenues 3

OBSERVATION 3. We offer the following PLAN implemented by Congress and the President 4

OBSERVATION 4. ADVANTAGES 4

ADVANTAGE 1. More efficient use of funds. 4

It’s more efficient to let the States spend their own money on infrastructure, rather than cycling it through Washington 4

ADVANTAGES 2 and 3. Save money and encourage innovation. 4

State infrastructure management would save money and encourage innovation better than federal management 4

ADVANTAGE 4. Better roads and economic growth. This happens in 2 ways: 4

A. State responsibility. Sending responsibility back to the States is the road to better roads 4

B. New investment. Eliminating federal funding would attract billions of new dollars into transportation upgrades 5

C. The Impact: Economic growth. Better roads promote economic growth and cut economic losses from congestion 5

ADVANTAGE 5. Lower deficits 5

Link: Killing the HTF would reduce the federal deficit $10 billion/year 5

Impact: The Economy. Every increase in the federal deficit hurts the economy 5

2A Evidence: Abolish Highway Trust Fund 6

DEFINITIONS & TOPICALITY 6

Highway Trust Fund and its taxes are part of Federal Transportation Policy 6

Highway Trust Fund was started in 1956 and is funded mostly by 18.4 c / gallon gas tax and 24.4 c/gallon diesel fuel tax 6

Highway Trust Fund = $40.9 billion/year 6

INHERENCY 7

Federal highway spending fails to meet US transportation needs 7

MINOR REPAIR / COUNTERPLAN RESPONSES 7

No imminent highway collapse, no critical role for the federal government, no need for tax increases. No highway crisis 7

Abolishing the federal gas tax would be better than other ways to solve federal highway funding shortfalls 7

SOLVENCY / ADVOCACY 8

States can manage just fine without the Highway Trust Fund 8

A/T “States can’t handle it” – They’re already doing 75% of transportation infrastructure spending 8

A/T “States can’t or won’t” – States can increase transportation projects independently of the federal government 9

A/T “States can’t afford it” – They could if the federal government got out of the way 9

A/T “States can’t afford it” – Then they’ll find other solutions off-budget that don’t raise taxes 9

A/T “States will neglect” – Transportation project proposals are usually approved at the state/local level 10

ADVANTAGES / SIGNIFICANCE 10

Federal highway aid promotes waste and inefficiency 10

Federal intervention adds substantial administrative costs to highways (17% more) 10

Leaving highway funding with the states promotes innovation, efficiency, and transparency 10

Regulations on federally-funded highway projects increase costs by 30% 11

Federal highway grants create 20-30% higher costs due to regulations. Davis-Bacon Act alone adds 10% 11

States would develop their own transportation strategies and find the most cost-effective solutions 11

Federal funding takes money from poor states and gives it to richer states. Removing federal involvement lets states do it cheaper and more efficiently 12

Abolishing HTF = higher total national highway investment overall by the States 12

HTF and federal highway funding contribute to the federal deficit 12

Federal deficits and total debt big and getting bigger 12

State governments can’t print money and can’t run deficits 13

Federal debt = reduced standard of living 13

DISADVANTAGE RESPONSES 14

A/T “We lose the ‘user pays’ principle” – SQ has already lost it 14

A/T “Crumbling infrastructure” – Turn: It isn’t that bad, and SQ policies make it worse 14

No crumbling infrastructure: US highways and bridges are doing fine 14

No pothole problem: Highways are getting smoother in Status Quo. Substantial improvement since 1989 14

A/T “Reduced infrastructure spending = lost jobs” – Not when the spending is financed by deficits 14

Obama’s “deteriorating” infrastructure stats are misleading: Includes things that aren’t part of the federal highway program 15

“10% of bridges are deficient” – Doesn’t mean anything 15

A/T “Bypass Davis-Bacon Act” – D-B is unworkable and unnecessary 15

A/T “Lose beneficial externalities of extra road construction” – Most road externalities are negative 15

Works Cited: Abolish Highway Trust Fund 16

END OF THE ROAD: The Case Against the Highway Trust Fund

If you’re frustrated by traffic jams or poor maintenance, a big reason is that highway funding takes an unnecessary and wasteful detour through the congestion of Washington DC. Please join my partner and me as we affirm that The United States federal government should substantially reform its transportation policy.

OBSERVATION 1. We offer the following DEFINITIONS.

**Policy**: “a high-level overall plan embracing the general goals and acceptable procedures especially of a governmental body” (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, copyright 2017* [*http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/policy*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/policy))  
  
**Substantial**: “considerable in quantity” (*Merriam Webster Online Dictionary, copyright 2017* [*http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantially*](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/substantially)*)*

**Transportation**: “means of conveyance or travel from one place to another” (*Merriam-Webster Online Dict. 2017* [*https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transportation*](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transportation)*)*

OBSERVATION 2. INHERENCY, or the structure of the Status Quo.

FACT 1. The Highway Trust Fund. Federal surface transportation infrastructure is funded by the HTF

The Eno Center for Transportation 2014 (neutral, non-partisan think tank that promotes policy innovation and leads professional development in the transportation industry) HOW WE PAY FOR TRANSPORTATION – The Life and Death of the Highway Trust Fund, Dec 2014 <https://www.enotrans.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Highway-Trust-Fund.pdf>

The current federal program for funding surface transportation infrastructure in the United States is broken. Since 2008, the U.S. Highway Trust Fund (HTF) has repeatedly been on the brink of insolvency, necessitating five infusions from the U.S. Treasury’s General Fund. Many solutions have been proposed to stabilize funding for the federal surface transportation program, but each has confronted substantial political barriers. This study details the circumstances that have led the U.S. transportation program to its current funding situation and explores how other nations have created sustainable mechanisms for ensuring adequate national-level investment in surface transportation systems. The findings indicate that while there are reasons the HTF structure in the United States has persisted, other nations have successfully developed durable programs financed through general funds. This research also suggests that embracing a funding model similar to that of other countries could help restore funding consistency to the U.S. program. Currently, excise taxes on gasoline and diesel fuel are deposited into the HTF; grants from the HTF are then distributed to state and local transportation authorities through the federal surface transportation program.

FACT 2. Deficit financing. Dedicated taxes aren’t enough, so Congress shifts billions from general revenues

Robert Poole 2015. (director of transportation policy and Searle Freedom Trust Transportation Fellow at Reason Foundation; an MIT-trained engineer; advised the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, the White House Office of Policy Development, National Economic Council, Government Accountability Office and state DOTs in numerous states) “Rethinking the Highway Trust Fund” 17 June 2015 <https://waysandmeans.house.gov/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Poole-Testimony.pdf>

As is widely known, the federal Highway Trust Fund (HTF) is no longer being supported exclusively by highway user revenues. Since 2008, Congress has shifted over $60 billion in general fund money into the HTF, so as to avoid reductions in annual federal highway and transit spending. Given the intense pressures being placed on general fund monies and “discretionary” spending due to the overall federal budget’s problems, there are serious concerns about whether such HTF bailouts can continue.

OBSERVATION 3. We offer the following PLAN implemented by Congress and the President

1. Congress votes to abolish the federal highway trust fund and all of its dedicated taxes.   
2. No enforcement nor funding, since Plan eliminates taxes and functions of the federal government.   
3. Timeline: No new projects funded starting the day after an Affirmative ballot. Existing projects completed and all funding ends by Sept 30, 2027. Trust fund taxes terminate the same day.  
4. Affirmative speeches may clarify

OBSERVATION 4. ADVANTAGES

ADVANTAGE 1. More efficient use of funds.

It’s more efficient to let the States spend their own money on infrastructure, rather than cycling it through Washington

Dr. Veronique de Rugy 2015. (PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University) 2 Feb 2015 “The Federal Gasoline Tax Should Be Abolished, Not Increased” <http://mercatus.org/publication/federal-gasoline-tax-should-be-abolished-not-increased>

It makes little sense for the federal government to take tax money from people in the states, run it through the federal bureaucracy, and then send the money back to the states through politically conceived formulas. But that’s how the current system works. Instead, state policymakers who believe that their state needs more money for infrastructure projects should make the case to their constituents that taxes should be increased to fund such endeavors. With the federal gas tax out of the way, such proposals would perhaps become an easier sell.

ADVANTAGES 2 and 3. Save money and encourage innovation.

State infrastructure management would save money and encourage innovation better than federal management

Dr. Veronique de Rugy 2015. (PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University) 2 Feb 2015 “The Federal Gasoline Tax Should Be Abolished, Not Increased” <http://mercatus.org/publication/federal-gasoline-tax-should-be-abolished-not-increased>

Better yet, any reluctance on the part of state policymakers to seek major increases in their state’s gas tax would create an incentive to experiment with alternative forms of financing infrastructure, including getting the private sector more involved. The beauty of allowing the states to re-assume responsibility for infrastructure policy is that it would encourage innovation and competition. The states would also be free of the federal mandates that come with receiving funds from the federal government. For example, [federal Davis-Bacon rules](http://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding%22%20%5Cl%20%224) require workers on federally funding projects to be paid the typically higher “prevailing wage,” which unnecessarily increases the cost of projects by approximately 10 percent.

ADVANTAGE 4. Better roads and economic growth. This happens in 2 ways:

1. State responsibility. Sending responsibility back to the States is the road to better roads

Chris Edwards 2013. (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee ) “Crumbling Infrastructure” 20 Mar 2013 NATIONAL REVVIEW <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/343397/crumbling-infrastructure-chris-edwards>

Yet the way forward cannot be to jack up federal spending, since the federal government is essentially broke. Instead, we should encourage greater innovation at the state level to get more bang for our infrastructure buck. Privatization and new electronic tolling systems on highways and bridges, for example, can help the states finance new investment. In turn, that would leave more of the existing transportation funds to patch the potholes and fix the bridges that do need repairs.

1. New investment. Eliminating federal funding would attract billions of new dollars into transportation upgrades

Chris Edwards 2014. (B.A. and Masters degrees in economics; director of tax policy studies at Cato ; expert on federal and state tax and budget issues; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee) “Cut Federal Highway Spending” 8 July 2014 NATIONAL REVIEW <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/382141/cut-federal-highway-spending-chris-edwards>

Cutting federal aid would encourage states to partly privatize their highways through public-private partnerships (P3s). America is lagging countries such as Canada and Australia in the worldwide trend toward infrastructure P3s. If we embraced these reforms, we could attract billions of dollars of private financing to help upgrade our highways and bridges.

1. The Impact: Economic growth. Better roads promote economic growth and cut economic losses from congestion

James Pethokoukis 2014 (journalist) “The US needs better roads and bridges – and less congestion – but not a higher federal gasoline tax” 8 May 2014 <https://www.aei.org/publication/the-us-needs-better-roads-and-bridges-and-less-congestion-but-not-a-higher-federal-gasoline-tax/>

Now the case for upgrading American transportation infrastructure isn’t about short-term Keynesian stimulus. It’s about long-term growth. “Places that have the greatest accessibility, that enable more people to interact in less time, produce the greatest wealth,” write transportation experts Matthew Kahn and David Levinson[in a 2011 report](http://www.brookings.edu/~/media/Research/Files/Papers/2011/2/highway%20infrastructure%20kahn%20levinson/02_highway_infrastructure_kahn_levinson_paper.PDF). More accessibility also means more economic mobility. A 2013 analysis from the [Equality of Opportunity Project](http://obs.rc.fas.harvard.edu/chetty/website/v2/Geography%20Executive%20Summary%20and%20Memo%20January%202014.pdf) found climbing the ladder much harder in cities with longer commute times. Indeed, the monetized cost of US congestion is around $120 billion a year.

ADVANTAGE 5. Lower deficits

Link: Killing the HTF would reduce the federal deficit $10 billion/year

Prof. Rohit T. Aggarwala 2013 (professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs) 23 Jan 2013 “Want Better Roads? Kill the Gas Tax” <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-01-23/drop-the-federal-gas-tax-and-build-better-roads>

1. Ending the federal program would be relatively straightforward. The gas tax and all programs it funds would sunset, perhaps after a few years to allow states time to adjust. This would amount to a $29 billion annual federal tax cut, plus a reduction in the federal deficit of roughly $10 billion per year, because the trust funds would stop overspending. Some 4,000 federal jobs could be trimmed.

Impact: The Economy. Every increase in the federal deficit hurts the economy

Dr William Gale and Benjamin Harris 2011. (Gale - PhD in economics, Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Brookings Institution and co-director of the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center; former assistant professor in the Department of Economics at UCLA, and a senior economist for the Council of Economic Advisers under President George H.W. Bush; Harris - master’s degree in economics from Cornell University and a master’s degree in quantitative methods from Columbia University; senior research associate with the Economics Studies Program at the Brookings Institution) “A VAT for the United States: Part of the Solution” <http://www.taxanalysts.com/www/freefiles.nsf/Files/GALE-HARRIS-5.pdf/$file/GALE-HARRIS-5.pdf>

But even in the absence of a crisis, sustained deficits have deleterious effects, as they translate into lower national savings, higher interest rates, and increased indebtedness to foreign investors, all of which serve to reduce future national income. Gale and Orszag (2004a) estimate that a 1 percent of GDP increase in the deficit will raise interest rates by 25 to 35 basis points and reduce national saving by 0.5 to 0.8 percentage points of GDP. Engen and Hubbard (2004) obtain similar results regarding interest rates.

2A Evidence: Abolish Highway Trust Fund

DEFINITIONS & TOPICALITY

Highway Trust Fund and its taxes are part of Federal Transportation Policy

Robert W. Poole Jr. and Dr. Adrian T. Moore 2010. (Poole - director of transportation policy and Searle Freedom Trust Transportation Fellow at Reason Foundation; an MIT-trained engineer; advised the Federal Highway Administration, the Federal Transit Administration, the White House Office of Policy Development, National Economic Council, Government Accountability Office and state DOTs in numerous states. Moore – PhD in economics; in 2006 he was appointed by Congress to serve on the National Surface Transportation Infrastructure Finance Commission) Restoring Trust in the Highway Trust Fund http://reason.org/files/restoring\_highway\_trust\_fund.pdf

Federal surface transportation policy is at a fateful crossroads. Since the completion of the Interstate system, the federal program has lost its focus and its sense of purpose. And the users-pay/users-benefit funding mechanism which built that system (dedicated fuel taxes) has gradually been transformed into a public works tax for Congress to spend on its own—rather than highway users’—priorities. Most proposals to reformulate the federal transportation program would further break faith with highway customers. While appearing to advocate simplification and program consolidation, they would add costly new non-highway programs, increasing highway use taxes but diverting much of the proceeds to still more non-highway programs, from passenger trains to energy subsidies to federalized land-use planning. Yet it is thanks to these very trends that American taxpayers no longer have trust in the Highway Trust Fund.

Highway Trust Fund was started in 1956 and is funded mostly by 18.4 c / gallon gas tax and 24.4 c/gallon diesel fuel tax

Robert Samuelson 2014 (economics journalist) WASHINGTON POST Three myths about the Highway Trust Fund 9 July 2014 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/robert-samuelson-three-myths-about-the-highway-trust-fund/2014/07/09/edb7c758-0770-11e4-a0dd-f2b22a257353\_story.html?utm\_term=.58807a5a80db

Created in 1956 to pay for the Interstate Highway System, the trust fund is both popular and controversial. To some, it’s a vast source of governmental “pork.” To others, it’s the foundation of a vital national transportation network. In 2013, the trust fund disbursed $50 billion to states — $43 billion for roads and $7 billion for mass transit, reports the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). For a typical project, the federal government covers 80 percent of the costs and states pick up the rest. The trust fund has a problem: It’s running out of money. Spending is projected to exceed its dedicated revenues, which come mainly from an 18.4-cents-per-gallon gasoline tax and a 24.4-cents-per-gallon diesel fuel tax.

Highway Trust Fund = $40.9 billion/year

Tax Policy Center 2017. (a joint venture of the [Urban Institute](http://www.urban.org/) and [Brookings Institution](http://www.brookings.edu/). The Center is made up of nationally recognized experts in tax, budget, and social policy who have served at the highest levels of government. Ethical note about the date: article is undated but references materials published in 2017) “What is the Highway Trust Fund, and how is it financed?” http://www.taxpolicycenter.org/briefing-book/what-highway-trust-fund-and-how-it-financed

The Congressional Budget Office estimates that Highway Trust Fund tax revenue will total $40.9 billion in fiscal year 2017 (Congressional Budget Office 2017). Revenue from the federal excise tax on gasoline ($25.7 billion) and on diesel fuel ($9.6 billion) accounts for 86 percent of the total. The remaining trust fund tax revenue comes from a sales tax on tractors and heavy trucks, an excise tax on tires for heavy vehicles, and an annual use tax on those vehicles. In addition to dedicated tax revenue, the trust fund receives a small amount of interest on trust fund reserves.

INHERENCY

Federal highway spending fails to meet US transportation needs

US Government Accountability Office 2015. Funding the Nation's Surface Transportation System 11 Feb 2015 http://gao.gov/highrisk/funding\_transportation/why\_did\_study#t=1

The challenge of funding the Nation’s surface transportation system is magnified by the fact that spending for surface transportation programs has not commensurately improved system performance. Many programs have not effectively addressed key challenges—such as increasing congestion and freight demand—because federal goals and roles have been unclear, programs have lacked links to performance, and programs have not used the best tools and approaches to ensure effective investment decisions.

MINOR REPAIR / COUNTERPLAN RESPONSES

No imminent highway collapse, no critical role for the federal government, no need for tax increases. No highway crisis

Marc Scribner 2015 (senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute ) [How Not to Fix, and Fix, Federal Surface Transportation Policy](https://cei.org/blog/how-not-fix-and-fix-federal-surface-transportation-policy) 9 March 2015 https://cei.org/blog/how-not-fix-and-fix-federal-surface-transportation-policy

A lot of misinformation and scaremongering swells around transportation infrastructure policy in Washington. We are told our highway network is on the verge of collapse ([false](http://reason.org/files/us_highway_performance_20_year_trends_full_study.pdf)), that the federal role is the most critical component of government transportation infrastructure funding ([false](http://www.pewtrusts.org/~/media/Assets/2014/09/SurfaceTransportationIntergovernmentalChallengesFunding.pdf#page=7)), and that things will only get worse unless we submit to massive federal gas tax increases ([false](http://reason.com/archives/2015/01/06/whos-going-to-pay-for-new-high)). To be sure, there are many transportation projects that should be completed over the next two decades. But the “crisis” is politically manufactured. The infrastructure lobby does no one any favors by overstating the problem and supporting reckless and inefficient tax-and-spend policies.

Abolishing the federal gas tax would be better than other ways to solve federal highway funding shortfalls

Dr. Veronique de Rugy 2015. (PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University) 2 Feb 2015 “The Federal Gasoline Tax Should Be Abolished, Not Increased“ <http://mercatus.org/publication/federal-gasoline-tax-should-be-abolished-not-increased> (brackets added)

Policymakers quick to point out that the current 18.4 cent per gallon rate hasn’t increased since the mid-1990s and, correctly, that price inflation has effectively eroded the “purchasing power” of the gas tax. The tax has also generated less revenue as motor vehicles have become more fuel efficient. Proponents of federal infrastructure spending act as if there are no alternatives to the ongoing budget shortfalls in the HTF [highway trust fund] than to raise the rate, find additional sources of revenue, or both. Opponents of raising the gas tax have been content to argue that the federal government should simply spend an amount equal to the revenue received. While that would certainly be preferable to a tax increase, abolishing the tax would be better still.

SOLVENCY / ADVOCACY

States can manage just fine without the Highway Trust Fund

Michael Sargent 2015 (Policy Analyst, Transportation & Infrastructure, Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies, Heritage Foundation) 11 May 2015 “Highway Trust Fund Basics: A Primer on Federal Surface Transportation Spending” http://www.heritage.org/transportation/report/highway-trust-fund-basics-primer-federal-surface-transportation-spending

In the midst of uncertainty in Washington, states have ramped up their own strategies to invest in their infrastructure. Over the past year, 23 states have acted to generate revenue devoted to infrastructure spending, and 110 transportation funding bills are awaiting action in 26 state legislatures in 2015. Most notably, states are using a variety of methods to raise revenue for transportation spending aside from increasing state gas taxes. These methods include:  
- State bond referenda,  
- Highway tolls,  
- Sales taxes dedicated to transportation,  
- Long-term credit financing, and  
- Private equity capital through P3s (public-private partnerships).   
In addition, states have opted to restrain transportation spending, with eight states cutting transportation spending for FY 2015. Collectively, these measures show that states have the capacity and willingness to determine their infrastructure spending at the state level without relying on Highway Trust Fund mandates or large gas tax hikes.

A/T “States can’t handle it” – They’re already doing 75% of transportation infrastructure spending

Dr. Veronique de Rugy and Tad DeHaven 2015 (de Rugy - PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. DeHaven - Research Analyst for the Spending and Budget Initiative at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University; was a budget analyst on federal and state budget issues for the Cato Institute; was a deputy director of the Indiana Office of Management and Budget.) “A New Road for Infrastructure Spending“ 16 March 2015 https://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2015/03/16/dont-raise-the-gas-tax-just-let-states-handle-transportation-funding

Federal spending on transportation infrastructure is a perfect example and, unfortunately, neither side is asking a more fundamental question: Should the federal government be involved at all? That question might strike readers as quaint, given that today’s federal government can spend money on pretty much anything it wants, including transportation infrastructure. But as the [Congressional Budget Office](http://www.finance.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Kile%20Testimony.pdf) noted last year, state and local governments already pay for approximately three-quarters of total highway and mass transit spending. Most of the remaining money comes from the federal Highway Trust Fund, which is primarily supported by the federal gas tax.

A/T “States can’t or won’t” – States can increase transportation projects independently of the federal government

Kenneth Orski 2015 (public policy consultant and former principal of the Urban Mobility Corporation) 28 May 2015 “STATES’ GROWING AUTONOMY FREES UP FEDERAL HIGHWAY FUNDING” https://www.heartland.org/news-opinion/news/states-growing-autonomy-frees-up-federal-highway-funding

Governors and state legislatures of both parties deem the prospect of future federal funding highly uncertain, and they are therefore trying to place their transportation programs on a more stable and predictable footing less dependent on the vagaries of federal budgeting. Using local funds enables states to avoid cumbersome federal requirements that increase project costs and delay implementation. States have a genuine incentive to embrace a more proactive role in funding transportation. Twenty-three states have taken steps to raise transportation revenue in 2015. Twelve have increased their gas tax or sales tax on gasoline since 2014, and seven have increased their taxes in 2015, according to ARTBA’s Transportation Investment Advocacy Center, which tracks state transportation funding initiatives. Other measures include increasing reliance on highway tolls. Nearly 350 miles of new toll roads have been added nationally since 2011, according to the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association. States are financing large-scale construction projects with long-term credit and entering into public-private partnerships that utilize private equity capital, availability payments, and highway tolling concessions.

A/T “States can’t afford it” – They could if the federal government got out of the way

Dr. Veronique de Rugy and Tad DeHaven 2015 (de Rugy - PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. DeHaven - Research Analyst for the Spending and Budget Initiative at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University; was a budget analyst on federal and state budget issues for the Cato Institute; was a deputy director of the Indiana Office of Management and Budget.) “A New Road for Infrastructure Spending“ 16 March 2015 https://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2015/03/16/dont-raise-the-gas-tax-just-let-states-handle-transportation-funding

It simply makes little sense for the federal government to take tax money from people in the states, run it through the federal bureaucracy, and then send the money back to the states via politically conceived formulas. That is how the current system works. Instead, state policymakers who believe that their state needs more money for transportation projects should make the case to their constituents that taxes should be increased to fund such endeavors. Pennsylvania, for example, [recently did just that](http://www.philly.com/philly/news/Pa_gas_tax_to_rise_Jan_1_again_in_2015_and_17_.html) and [it’s now “flush with cash.”](http://www.pennlive.com/midstate/index.ssf/2015/02/pennsylvania_flush_with_cash_f.html#incart_river) And with the federal gas tax out of the way, similar moves in other states might be an easier sell to constituents.

A/T “States can’t afford it” – Then they’ll find other solutions off-budget that don’t raise taxes

Dr. Veronique de Rugy and Tad DeHaven 2015 (de Rugy - PhD economics; senior research fellow at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University. DeHaven - Research Analyst for the Spending and Budget Initiative at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University; was a budget analyst on federal and state budget issues for the Cato Institute; was a deputy director of the Indiana Office of Management and Budget.) “A New Road for Infrastructure Spending“ 16 March 2015 https://www.usnews.com/opinion/economic-intelligence/2015/03/16/dont-raise-the-gas-tax-just-let-states-handle-transportation-funding

Better yet, any reluctance on the part of state policymakers to seek major increases in their state’s gas tax would create an incentive to experiment with alternative forms of financing transportation infrastructure, including getting the private sector more involved. The beauty of allowing the states to re-assume responsibility for infrastructure policy is that it would encourage innovation and competition.

A/T “States will neglect” – Transportation project proposals are usually approved at the state/local level

James Pethokoukis 2014 (journalist) “The US needs better roads and bridges – and less congestion – but not a higher federal gasoline tax” 8 May 2014 https://www.aei.org/publication/the-us-needs-better-roads-and-bridges-and-less-congestion-but-not-a-higher-federal-gasoline-tax/

[Transportation expert Rohit Aggarwala](http://www.bloombergview.com/articles/2013-01-23/drop-the-federal-gas-tax-and-build-better-roads) says Republicans should like the idea for its federalism, while Democrats should approve because “state and local referendums on raising taxes or issuing debt to pay for transportation projects usually pass.”

ADVANTAGES / SIGNIFICANCE

Federal highway aid promotes waste and inefficiency

Gabriel Roth 2010 (civil engineer and transportation economist; research fellow at the Independent Institute. During his 20 years with the World Bank, he was involved with transportation projects on five continents ) “Federal Highway Funding” 1 June 2010 https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding

Federal aid typically covers between 75 and 90 percent of the costs of federally supported highway projects. Because states spend only a small fraction of their own resources on these projects, state officials have less incentive to use funds efficiently and to fund only high-priority investments. Boston's Central Artery and Tunnel project (the "Big Dig"), for example, suffered from poor management and huge cost overruns. Federal taxpayers paid for more than half of the project's total costs, which soared from about $3 billion to about $15 billion.

Federal intervention adds substantial administrative costs to highways (17% more)

Gabriel Roth 2010 (civil engineer and transportation economist; research fellow at the Independent Institute. During his 20 years with the World Bank, he was involved with transportation projects on five continents ) “Federal Highway Funding” 1 June 2010 https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding

Finally, federal intervention adds substantial administrative costs to highway building. Planning for federally financed highways requires the detailed involvement of both federal and state governments. By dividing responsibility for projects, this split system encourages waste at both levels of government. Total federal, state, and local expenditures on highway "administration and research" when the highway trust fund was established in 1956 were 6.8 percent of construction costs. By 2002, these costs had risen to 17 percent of expenditures. The rise in federal intervention appears to have pushed up these expenditures substantially.

Leaving highway funding with the states promotes innovation, efficiency, and transparency

Gabriel Roth 2010 (civil engineer and transportation economist; research fellow at the Independent Institute. During his 20 years with the World Bank, he was involved with transportation projects on five continents ) “Federal Highway Funding” 1 June 2010 https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding

With the devolution of highway financing and control to the states, successful innovations in one state would be copied in other states. And without federal subsidies, state governments would have stronger incentives to ensure that funds were spent efficiently. An additional advantage is that highway financing would be more transparent without the complex federal trust fund. Citizens could better understand how their transportation dollars were being spent.

Regulations on federally-funded highway projects increase costs by 30%

Scott Beyer 2014 (journalist) “Death to the Federal Gas Tax” 22 Mar 2014 http://reason.com/archives/2014/03/22/death-to-the-federal-gas-tax

An executive order [from President Obama](http://www.fed-soc.org/publications/detail/executive-order-13502-use-of-project-labor-agreements-for-federal-construction-projects) in 2009 requires federal projects of over $25 million to use Project Labor Agreements, which discourage open bidding in favor of unionized collective bargaining. And "[Buy America](http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/49/5323)" provisions in the U.S. Code prevent purchases of certain foreign construction materials, even if they're cheaper. Other regulations require redundant environmental reviews and over-demanding construction standards. Former FHWA head Robert Farris has [estimated](http://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding) that, altogether, federal regulations increase project costs by 30 percent.

Federal highway grants create 20-30% higher costs due to regulations. Davis-Bacon Act alone adds 10%

Gabriel Roth 2010 (civil engineer and transportation economist; research fellow at the Independent Institute. During his 20 years with the World Bank, he was involved with transportation projects on five continents ) “Federal Highway Funding” 1 June 2010 https://www.downsizinggovernment.org/transportation/federal-highway-funding

A second problem is that federal grants usually come with an array of extraneous federal regulations that increase costs. Highway grants, for example, come with Davis-Bacon rules and Buy America provisions, which raise highway costs substantially. Davis-Bacon rules require that workers on federally funded projects be paid "prevailing wages" in an area, which typically means higher union wages. Davis-Bacon rules increase the costs of federally funded projects by an average of about 10 percent, which wastes billions of dollars per year.Ralph Stanley, the entrepreneur who created the private Dulles Greenway toll highway in Virginia, estimated that federal regulations increase highway construction costs by about 20 percent.Robert Farris, who was commissioner of the Tennessee Department of Transportation and also head of the Federal Highway Administration, suggested that federal regulations increase costs by 30 percent.

States would develop their own transportation strategies and find the most cost-effective solutions

Reihan Salam 2014. (executive editor, and a National Review Institute Policy Fellow)  
The Transportation Empowerment Act as a Model for Conservative Policymakers NATIONAL REVIEW 18 July 2014  
http://www.nationalreview.com/agenda/383127/transportation-empowerment-act-model-conservative-policymakers-reihan-salam

Over time, states will develop transportation strategies tailored to their particular circumstances. Densely-populated states like New York and New Jersey might choose to devote resources to creating Helsinki-style mobility networks while a state like Utah might instead choose to invest in a more expansive road network to support exurban development. States would no longer be hampered by the imperatives of national politics, and the most cost-effective, consumer-friendly state transportation bodies will find eager imitators across the country.

Federal funding takes money from poor states and gives it to richer states. Removing federal involvement lets states do it cheaper and more efficiently

WALL STREET JOURNAL 2015 “Abolish the Gas Tax” 14 Jan 2015 <http://www.nssga.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Abolish-the-Gas-Tax-WSJ.pdf> (brackets added)

In an ingenious 2013 paper, Pengyu Zhu of Boise State University and Jeffrey Brown of Florida State studied federal highway spending between 1974 and 2008. They found that the gas tax tended to redistribute money from poorer to wealthier states and to regions with lower transportation needs than other parts of the country. Texas recovered only 88 cents of every dollar residents paid in taxes, while seven states and Washington, D.C. (no surprise) received more than twice as much. Such misallocated resources are the inevitable result of the political mediation of the HTF [Highway Trust Fund]. Almost three-quarters of highway spending is already supplied by state and local governments, and if the federal role is reduced, they can decide either to increase their own gas taxes; fund roads some other way, such as tolls or public-private partnerships; or use tax dollars for other priorities like schools. States can build cheaper in any case, since the Davis-Bacon prevailing wage rules and Buy America procurement provisions that accompany federal funding don’t apply.

Abolishing HTF = higher total national highway investment overall by the States

Prof. Rohit T. Aggarwala 2013 (professor at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs) 23 Jan 2013 “Want Better Roads? Kill the Gas Tax” https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-01-23/drop-the-federal-gas-tax-and-build-better-roads

Thus, the federal gas tax has become both a ceiling and a floor. It makes raising state gas taxes unpalatable. And since states get back at least what they contribute, the tax encourages them to keep spending even if they don’t really need more roads. Getting rid of the tax would force a serious discussion in each state about how, and how much, to fund roads and transit. States could choose to reimpose the same tax, or they could set a different rate based on their desired level of transportation spending. They could choose to raise other kinds of revenue to pay for roads and transit -- such as sales taxes, property taxes, local taxes or tolls. Or they could simply reduce their transportation spending.  
Greener Policies  
Because the biggest states have the biggest needs, this would probably increase investment nationally.

HTF and federal highway funding contribute to the federal deficit

Patrick Gaskins 2016 (vice president of Financial Services with AmeriQuest Transportation Services.; nearly 20 years’ experience as a financial services professional in the transportation industry) “Funding the Future: Elections and the Highway Trust Fund” Sept 2016 http://www.monitordaily.com/opinion-posts/60257/

I think we’ve lost our way with the Highway Trust Fund. The fund was originally designed to provide matching funds to states for the construction of approximately 40,000 miles of interstate highways. Under President Eisenhower, the federal government committed to providing 90% of the funds for the system’s construction and maintenance. Eisenhower’s goal was to have user fees (fuel taxes) pay for all of the construction and maintenance costs making sure that the system’s cost would not contribute to the federal deficit. As we have all seen over the years, this is not the case. Congress supplements the Highway Trust Fund from the General Fund rather than developing a viable and sustainable funding source. As the Congressional Budget Office has said, “spending from the Highway Trust Fund exceeds it revenue.”

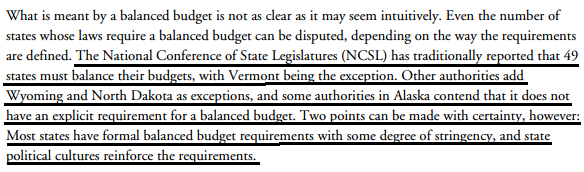
Federal deficits and total debt big and getting bigger

Congressional Budget Office 2017 “The 2017 Long-Term Budget Outlook” 30 Mar 2017 https://www.cbo.gov/publication/52480

At 77 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), federal debt held by the public is now at its highest level since shortly after World War II. If current laws generally remained unchanged, the Congressional Budget Office projects, growing budget deficits would boost that debt sharply over the next 30 years; it would reach 150 percent of GDP in 2047. The prospect of such large and growing debt poses substantial risks for the nation and presents policymakers with significant challenges.

State governments can’t print money and can’t run deficits

National Conference of State Legislatures 2010. “NCSL FISCAL BRIEF: STATE BALANCED BUDGET PROVISIONS” Oct 2010 http://www.ncsl.org/documents/fiscal/StateBalancedBudgetProvisions2010.pdf



Federal debt = reduced standard of living

THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND REFORM 2010. (bipartisan panel appointed by Pres. Obama in 2010 to write a report on ways to solve the imbalance in the federal budget; chaired by Sen. Alan Simpson, Former Republican Senator from Wyoming and Erskine Bowles, Chief of Staff to President Clinton) Dec 2010, “THE MOMENT OF TRUTH - REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY AND REFORM” [www.fiscalcommission.gov/sites/fiscalcommission.gov/files/documents/TheMomentofTruth12\_1\_2010.pdf](http://www.fiscalcommission.gov/sites/fiscalcommission.gov/files/documents/TheMomentofTruth12_1_2010.pdf)

Large debt will put America at risk by exposing it to foreign creditors. They currently own more than half our public debt, and the interest we pay them reduces our own standard of living. The single largest foreign holder of our debt is China, a nation that may not share our country’s aspirations and strategic interests. In a worst-case scenario, investors could lose confidence that our nation is able or willing to repay its loans – possibly triggering a debt crisis that would force the government to implement the most stringent of austerity measures.

DISADVANTAGE RESPONSES

A/T “We lose the ‘user pays’ principle” – SQ has already lost it

Tanya Snyder 2014 (journalist) “Eno: Stop Obsessing Over the Gas Tax and Change How We Fund Transpo” 4 Dec 2014 <http://usa.streetsblog.org/2014/12/04/eno-stop-obsessing-over-the-gas-tax-and-change-how-we-fund-transpo/> (brackets and parentheses in original)

In a new report [[PDF](https://enotrans.r.worldssl.net/wp-content/uploads/wpsc/downloadables/Highway-Trust-Fund1.pdf)], Eno compares the U.S. method of funding transportation to that of five peer countries. Ours is the only one that still pretends to rely on a “user-pay” system. (Yes, pretends: The last six years of constant last-ditch infusions from the general fund, totaling $65 billion, have exposed that particular myth.)

A/T “Crumbling infrastructure” – Turn: It isn’t that bad, and SQ policies make it worse

Michael Sargent 2015 (Policy Analyst, Transportation & Infrastructure, Thomas A. Roe Institute for Economic Policy Studies, Heritage Foundation) 11 May 2015 “Highway Trust Fund Basics: A Primer on Federal Surface Transportation Spending” http://www.heritage.org/transportation/report/highway-trust-fund-basics-primer-federal-surface-transportation-spending

While the common perception is that America’s infrastructure is “crumbling” and thus requires more federal expenditures, the reality is not nearly as bleak. Some infrastructure certainly requires maintenance and updating, as congestion is a major concern in many metropolitan areas. Indeed, the federal government provides perverse incentives for states to spend billions on new, unneeded projects instead of maintaining existing systems

No crumbling infrastructure: US highways and bridges are doing fine

Chris Edwards 2013. (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee ) “Crumbling Infrastructure” 20 Mar 2013 NATIONAL REVVIEW http://www.nationalreview.com/article/343397/crumbling-infrastructure-chris-edwards

But is America’s infrastructure really crumbling? For highways and bridges, the government’s own data show that the answer is generally no. Let’s look at the data on bridges. The Federal Highway Administration reports that there were 5,345 “structurally deficient” bridges in the National Highway System in 2011. That was just 4.6 percent of all 116,929 NHS bridges. And here’s the surprising fact: That percentage has been falling steadily from the 8.7 percent reported by the FHWA in 1992.

No pothole problem: Highways are getting smoother in Status Quo. Substantial improvement since 1989

Chris Edwards 2013. (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee ) “Crumbling Infrastructure” 20 Mar 2013 NATIONAL REVVIEW http://www.nationalreview.com/article/343397/crumbling-infrastructure-chris-edwards

Rather than becoming more potholed, as LaHood claimed, our highways are getting smoother. Since 1989 the FHWA has reported the International Roughness Index for U.S. highways; the index ranges from 0 for the smoothest highways to 300 for the roughest. Here are the calculations of average IRI scores for different types of highways in 1989 and 2009: urban interstates, 115 and 92; other urban freeways, 124 and 101; rural interstates, 101 and 77; and other rural arteries, 104 and 87. For each type of highway, the scores show that surface qualities have improved substantially over time.

A/T “Reduced infrastructure spending = lost jobs” – Not when the spending is financed by deficits

Prof. Vinod Thomas 2016 (National University of Singapore) “Will more infrastructure spending increase US growth” 13 Dec 2016 https://www.brookings.edu/blog/future-development/2016/12/13/will-more-infrastructure-spending-increase-us-growth/

But even when a major infrastructure splurge is well-conceived, the financing still matters. If done mainly through public borrowing for power and transport, the Trump administration will need to account for the effect of debt servicing on other investments such as health and education. Unconstrained expansion of spending without attention to the sources of financing would also lead to inflationary pressures.

Obama’s “deteriorating” infrastructure stats are misleading: Includes things that aren’t part of the federal highway program

Chris Edwards 2013. (master’s degree in economics; former senior economist on the congressional Joint Economic Committee ) “Crumbling Infrastructure” 20 Mar 2013 NATIONAL REVVIEW http://www.nationalreview.com/article/343397/crumbling-infrastructure-chris-edwards

In his State of the Union address this year, Obama implied that our infrastructure was “deteriorating,” and he pointed to “nearly 70,000 structurally deficient bridges.” The president was talking about not only NHS bridges — which the federal government is partly responsible for funding — but all bridges in the country, which totaled 605,086 in 2011.

“10% of bridges are deficient” – Doesn’t mean anything

Patrick Brennan 2014. (journalist ) 25 Apr 2014 “America’s Infrastructure Isn’t Crumbling” NATIONAL REVIEW http://www.nationalreview.com/agenda/376587/americas-infrastructure-isnt-crumbling-patrick-brennan

It sounds scary that 10 percent of America’s bridges are deficient (that’s about 63,000 out about about 600,000), but what does “structurally deficient” actually mean? It doesn’t indicate any particular risk of failure, just that the bridge rates a 4 or below on the FHA’s condition-rating index, which means it has “advanced section loss, deterioration, spalling or scour” or something worse (there’s another ratings system that’s two decades old that they sometimes use, too). But if it’s rated 2, 1, or 0, the bridge is closed or considered for closure. So it’s not clear we’re running serious risks — which is why bridge collapses are really rare.

A/T “Bypass Davis-Bacon Act” – D-B is unworkable and unnecessary

Alex Bolt 2014 (research associate with Competitive Enterprise Institute; B.S. in history and political science) “The Case for Repealing the Davis-Bacon Act” 31 July 2014 https://cei.org/2014/07/31/the-case-for-repealing-the-davis-bacon-act

The Davis-Bacon Act is highly controversial because of the hopelessly broad mandates. To start with, it’s not exactly easy to determine what local prevailing wages are, as evidenced by the fact that the [Department of Labor has never conceived of a program to issue accurate wage determinations.](http://www.nationalreview.com/article/384107/repeal-davis-bacon-lamar-alexander)In 1979, the Government Accountability Office (then the Government Accounting Office) even produced a report titled, “The Davis-Bacon Act Should Be Repealed,” calling the law “unnecessary.”

A/T “Lose beneficial externalities of extra road construction” – Most road externalities are negative

Bruce Thompson 2015 (journalist) 8 July 2015 “Why Transportation Costs Are Out of Line” URBAN MILWAUKEE http://urbanmilwaukee.com/2015/07/08/the-data-wonk-why-transportation-costs-are-out-of-line/

Another justification for subsidizing a private good is that it offers positive externalities—benefits to society as a whole. An example is education. It is easy to exclude students who don’t pay tuition and additional students require more teachers. Yet all modern societies heavily subsidize education in the belief an educated population benefits society as a whole and it is unfair to exclude children who have the bad luck to be born into poor families. It is hard to identify similar positive externalities when it comes to roads. Most of the externalities are negative—pollution and sprawl by subsidizing car travel. Subsidizing freight travel shifts the supply chain to favor larger and more distant production over smaller and closer operations, countering any desire to buy local. Government subsidies also make life harder for competitive modes of transportation, whether freight rail or public transit. Treating roads as private goods and making sure users pay the full costs would help level the playing field.

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