

# Congress detours from common sense on the Highway Trust Fund

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Editorial Board

## The Post's View

By [Editorial Board](#),

BOTH PARTIES want to do nothing but squabble before this year's election. Not much will stop them — except, perhaps, this dose of reality: If political point-scoring is all they accomplish over the next several weeks, work on the nation's roads, bridges and rails will come to a halt.

The federal [Highway Trust Fund](#) is set to [run out of money this summer](#). Without a fix, federally backed transportation projects all over the country — not just highways — would be in danger of severe disruption or cancellation. That translates into high costs now to stop and restart projects once funding comes through, higher costs in the future as contractors build the risk of funding holdups into their prices, downward pressure on construction jobs and unnecessary delay for anyone who uses the infrastructure. Failing to shore up the fund in time would be plain legislative malfeasance.

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## Taking the long view

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But, to date, Washington's [moves to fix the funding problem](#) haven't been far from that low distinction. The smart and obvious way to fund federal transportation policy is to create a steady, long-term funding source to finance multi-year projects, one that relies on fees from users — such as a higher gas tax or a vehicle-miles tax. It is both efficient and fair to require drivers to pay according to the amount they exploit and degrade the roads. This discourages overuse rather than subsidizing big-time road users. Congress set up just such a system when it established the [gasoline tax](#) and dedicated its revenue to the Highway Trust Fund. But lawmakers haven't [raised the gas tax since 1993](#), preferring instead budgetary gimmickry and short-term patches to fill holes in the fund.

This year has been no different. The latest news is that [House Republican leaders are drawing up a measly one-year trust fund fix](#), which would conveniently push tough revenue choices past this year's election. They are proposing to offset the plan by ending most U.S. Postal Service Saturday delivery, which would take 10 years of savings to pay for that one year of proposed highway spending. An earlier proposal from President Obama would run for four years and see a worthwhile jump in infrastructure spending, but it would rely on a one-time windfall from corporate tax reform.

A handful of senators, meanwhile, met Wednesday to begin hammering out a plan. At least both parties were at the table. But the debate still appears to be moving inevitably toward how to push the issue off for a while, not about adopting smart transportation policy any time soon.

Don't get us wrong: The Saturday delivery change makes a lot of sense on its own. So does corporate tax reform. But continuing to jury-rig the highway budget with unrelated "offsets" does not. If the nation's leaders are too cowardly to make obvious policy choices this year, they will have to develop some backbone before the next self-imposed transportation funding crisis. At the rate we're going, that won't be so long from now.

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