

# The Fun in the Highway Trust Fund

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Gail Collins

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Today let's find fun ways to talk about the Highway Trust Fund.

I'm thinking about a game, where players move tiny cars around the board, trying to make money for road and bridge repair. If nobody wins, construction workers will be laid off, the economy will tank and every player has to spend the winter sitting in a 7-foot-wide pothole.

This could happen! O.K., not necessarily the pothole part. But the Trust Fund is about to run out of money. It's a fiscal cliff for the nation's road crews.

Totally important subject. Plus, you know, we've got a game.

Gather around the board. Players have to pick a route toward raising at least \$15 billion before Congress bolts for summer vacation. Every approach has its own dangers.

Plus, there are penalty cards. For instance, if somebody draws "Wait for comprehensive tax reform!" the entire game will come to a halt while all the most thoughtful players go into another room and put their heads down for two hours. Everybody else will be allowed to hang around the bar and drink merlot.

Ready to go? Pick your own route to the finish line:

## 1) Gas Tax Turnpike

The Trust Fund gets its money from a federal gas tax, which is currently 18.4 cents a gallon. I say currently as in "ever since 1993." That was part of the dreadful Clinton tax increases that led to a long, dark winter of balanced budgets and 4 percent unemployment rates.

The player hops over to a picture of Senator Chris Murphy of Connecticut, who recently introduced a bill that would raise the gas tax 6 cents a year for the next two years. On the day before his press conference, a 118-year-old swing bridge in Murphy's home state got stuck in the open position, blocking trains carrying thousands of commuters.

"Somebody in the Senate needs to break the ice," he said.

Once a player hits Murphy's picture, she has to sit there until the senator gets some co-sponsors. He's working on it.

## 2) Loophole Lane

"Everybody's looking for an answer, and it's staring us in the face," says Senator Patty Murray of Washington, where a bridge north of Seattle collapsed last year.

Murray points out that Representative Dave Camp, the Republican chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, has already come up with a long list of tax loopholes he'd like to close. The Senate



Democrats should just volunteer to take a couple, she says. The only problem with this plan is that the Republicans in the House who are not Dave Camp have greeted his ideas as if they were a pack of rabid muskrats.

This route involves crossing the treacherous John Boehner Gulch.

### 3) Surprise Street

In order to avoid the Gulch, a player may decide to take a spending-cut route. She then draws from a deck. If the card reads “Repeal Obamacare,” the other players have the right to grab the board and thwack her over the head.

Other cards read: “Stop Saturday mail delivery.” Weren’t expecting that one, right? But, yes, some House Republicans have been looking at getting the money from the Postal Service, which could save about \$20 billion over 10 years by ending weekend mail.

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On this route, players skip two turns out of every seven.

### 4) Holiday Highway

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid and Senator Rand Paul of Kentucky are proposing a tax holiday for multinational corporations.

Multinationals like to sit offshore on top of piles of cash that they plan to bring back to the United States the very moment we declare that they will only have to pay a teeny portion of the taxes that they rightfully owe. Then there’s a holiday — whoopee! — and a one-time flood of money. The problem is that it encourages these guys to park their profits abroad waiting for Congress to cave in once again.

Players who pick this route get to wear special party hats. The downside is that Senator Elizabeth Warren will come into the room and bop them with a kazoo.

### 5) Prestidigitation Parkway

The last time we had this Highway Trust Fund problem, Congress just shifted cash from its general fund. The deficit actually did not get bigger. This worked because Congress is a magic place, and accounting is a mystical occupation.

Many Republicans oppose this idea on principle. These are different principles from the ones that caused them to approve \$75 billion worth of permanent tax breaks this week in the House without paying for them in any way whatsoever.

On this route, a player simply grabs a bunch of money from the middle of the board and smirks.

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So, which way do you want to go, people? The gas tax certainly makes the most sense. Closing loopholes is always good. But if we’re predicting the future, I’d put my little car on the parkway where nobody actually has to do anything, all decisions get put off and everybody announces that the problem will be resolved just as soon as we get comprehensive tax reform.

In the meantime, break out the merlot.