

And Why President Bush Should Veto It

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By Rep. Mike Pence

On April 2, 2004, I was one of 65 House members who voted against the Transportation Equity Act because I could not support a highway bill that was fiscally irresponsible and unfair to Indiana. Despite the fondest hopes of millions of Americans who look to the Republican majority for fiscal restraint, Congress has again demonstrated that wasteful government spending and pork barrel politics are truly bipartisan.

This nation's economy rolls on the highways and byways of America. As such, our prosperity depends on our infrastructure, and no one doubts that there are real needs that a responsible highway bill should address. Unfortunately, this bill was fiscally irresponsible in its size and specifics.

Earlier this year, President Bush proposed to increase highway funding 17% over the next six years. The House bill will increase spending by at least 26%. But it won't stop there. The bill also contains a provision forcing an automatic spending increase in two years.

As the Bush Administration observed on the eve of the vote, the House bill will exceed the amount of income anticipated from the federal gasoline tax and will cause Congress to either raise taxes or raid the General Fund of the Treasury to make up the difference. In a difficult time for our economy, and with \$500 billion annual deficits, I could not support legislation that will mandate more debt for our grandkids in the future or higher taxes for Hoosiers at the pump today.

The bill is also laden with pork barrel spending of historic proportions. In 1987, President Reagan vetoed a highway bill he described as a "textbook example of pork barrel politics" because it contained 152 earmarks - projects requested by individual members of Congress. This year's highway bill has 3,249. While these projects are sought by members for their districts, mine included, it is also true that these projects hurt all taxpayers because they are allocated not on the basis of merit, but on the basis of seniority and election year politics. A prominent local official in my Congressional district recently argued that taxpayers in Muncie shouldn't be forced to pay to build roads in other parts of the state and he was right.

And thanks to the extraordinary increase in pork barrel spending, Indiana will see its share of federal highway dollars decline dramatically under this bill. Hoosiers are supposed to get back 90.5 cents of every dollar we send to Washington. However, under the last major highway bill, which passed in 1998, Hoosiers got back only 88 cents for every dollar. Alaska got more than \$6 back for every dollar it paid in gas taxes; Washington, D.C. got \$3.47, Rhode Island got \$2.20, and Vermont got \$1.80.

But because the earmarks comprise such a significant portion of the overall bill, the 90.5-cent

formula guarantee will apply to a smaller portion of funds over the next six years than it did in the past. Instead of increasing Indiana's return on every dollar of gasoline taxes paid into the Highway Trust Fund, Hoosiers will see their return on federal gasoline taxes reduced by more than 10 cents on the dollar.

Often these earmarks include projects unrelated to highways, like the \$8.5 million for museums or the \$2 million for a ferryboat in Massachusetts. Other examples include: \$4 million for graffiti elimination in New York, \$250,000 for a website for the Blue Ridge Travel Association in Virginia, \$1.5 million for the Henry Ford Museum in Michigan and \$1 million for a parking lot in California.

All of these projects are taken from the highway bill first and states like Indiana get a percentage of what is left on the plate. If the money in the highway bill attributed to special projects was included in the standard formula, Indiana would receive an additional \$255 million for highway improvements.

It's no wonder state leaders counseled the Indiana Congressional Delegation to oppose the bill and urged the passage of any amendment that would increase the scope of the minimum guarantee to be equal or close to current law. While every member of Congress from Indiana, except one, did just that, our efforts to amend fairness into this bill were defeated.

It is never easy to oppose the big spenders in Congress and they have ways of making their authority felt by those who challenge them. Nevertheless, I am proud to have voted against this bill and would do so again, regardless of the consequences.

To those who equate pork barrel spending to success in Congress, I can only think of that line from the late Barry Goldwater's book entitled, "Conscience of a Conservative" where he wrote, "And if I should later be attacked for neglecting my constituents' interests, I shall reply that I was informed their main interest is liberty and that in that cause I am doing the very best I can."

This highway bill is fiscally irresponsible and unfair to Indiana. President Reagan vetoed a budget busting highway bill in 1987 and burnished his credentials as a fiscal conservative. President Bush should do the same, reassert the Republican Party's historic commitment to fiscal discipline, demand the Congress put its conservative principles into practice and produce a highway bill that is fair to taxpayers of today and tomorrow.

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