



Special Report: The Presidential Candidates on Transportation

July 18, 2008 Edition

As the 2008 presidential campaign season continues, ARTBA is carefully monitoring the candidates' positions on transportation policy. The presumptive nominees of both major parties have made numerous relevant public statements in debates and other settings, especially – through the spring primary season – relating to the federal gas tax. Both candidates have cast votes and made floor statements in the U.S. Senate. The candidates' websites also include varying amounts of information outlining their respective positions on transportation and related issues.

Since the beginning of the presidential primary season, ARTBA has met with several candidates or their key policy advisors and supporters. ARTBA's leadership is now in the process of meeting with advisors to both remaining candidates, as well as with party officials and Platform Committee members in advance of the Democratic and Republican national conventions.

ARTBA has drawn this report principally from debates, public statements and the candidates' official websites since mid-2007. The report also includes Senate votes and floor statements going back to 1998. ARTBA will conduct further research and monitor relevant public comments by the candidates during the coming months so we can report the latest information to ARTBA's members as they consider the presidential candidates. We will also include the transportation records of the vice presidential candidates when Senators McCain and Obama make those designations.

It should be noted that nothing in this document is intended to constitute an endorsement of either candidate or party position.

Under the heading for each candidate, items are listed chronologically.

Democratic Presidential Candidate
Barack Obama
U.S. Senator, Illinois (2005-present)

Senate floor statement, 7/29/05 (debating final passage of SAFETEA-LU Conference Report):

“Mr. OBAMA: ...I am pleased that the conference report... protects an important program administered by the Department of Transportation[,] the Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Program also known as the DBE Program.

“The DBE Program ensures that small businesses owned and controlled by socially and economically disadvantaged individuals are able to compete on a level playing field for federally funded highway and transit contracts.

“I strongly endorse the DBE Program and am pleased that this program continues to enjoy bipartisan support.

“Since the DBE Program was started in 1982, the field of highway contractors has grown more racially diverse. The DBE Program was expanded to include women in 1987, and that improvement to the program has opened the doors for women contractors to join what has traditionally been an all-male field. Despite the increased fairness and greater opportunity for minority and women contractors since the inception of DBE, there continues to be a strong need for the DBE Program.

“Unfortunately, studies have shown that when DBE Programs end, many contractors simply revert to their old practices, denying contracts to small companies owned by minorities or the economically disadvantaged. It is clear that the DBE Program is still needed to secure the gains made and encourage even greater opportunity for these small businesses, and I am pleased that the conferees have recognized that continuing need and have retained this program.

“Federally funded highway and transit contracts are big business, and it is imperative that we give everyone the big guys and the little guys a fair opportunity to take part. The DBE Program is vital to increasing participation in our federally funded highway projects.”

Campaign Website (www.barackobama.com, accessed on 1/23/08):

Reform Federal Transportation Funding: As president, Barack Obama will re-evaluate the transportation funding process to ensure that smart growth considerations are taken into account. Obama will build upon his efforts in the Senate to ensure that more Metropolitan Planning Organizations create policies to incentivize greater bicycle and pedestrian usage of roads and sidewalks, and he will also re-commit federal resources to public mass transportation projects across the country. Building more livable and sustainable communities will not only reduce the amount of time individuals spent commuting, but will also have significant benefits to air quality, public health and reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

Require States to Plan for Energy Conservation: Current law simply asks governors and their state Departments of Transportation to "consider" energy conservation as a condition of receiving federal transportation dollars. As president, Obama will require governors and local leaders in our metropolitan areas to make "energy conservation" a required part of their planning for the expenditure of federal transportation funds.

Level Employer Incentives for Driving and Public Transit: The federal tax code rewards driving to work by allowing employers to provide parking benefits of \$205 per month tax free to their employees. The tax code provides employers with commuting benefits for transit, carpooling or vanpooling capped at \$105 per month. This gives drivers a nearly 2:1 advantage over transit users. Obama will reform the tax code to make benefits for driving and public transit or ridesharing equal.

Campaign Policy Proposal, 2/13/08:

In a speech at Janesville, Wisconsin, Senator Obama released his economic agenda, which included a transportation proposal:

“For years, we have stood by while our national infrastructure has crumbled and decayed. In 2005, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave it a D, citing problems with our airports, dams, schools, highways, and waterways. One out of three urban bridges were classified as structurally deficient, and we all saw the tragic results of what that could mean in Minnesota last year. Right here in Wisconsin, we know that \$500 million of freight will come through this state by 2020, and if we do not have the infrastructure to handle it, we will not get the business.

“For our economy, our safety, and our workers, we have to rebuild America. I’m proposing a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that will invest \$60 billion over ten years. This investment will multiply into almost half a trillion dollars of additional infrastructure spending and generate nearly two million new jobs - many of them in the construction industry that’s been hard hit by this housing crisis. The repairs will be determined not by politics, but by what will maximize our safety and homeland security; what will keep our environment clean and our economy strong. And we’ll fund this bank by ending this war in Iraq. It’s time to stop spending billions of dollars a week trying to put Iraq back together and start spending the money on putting America back together instead.”

Campaign Position Paper (www.barackobama.com, accessed on 2/28/08):

Senator Obama’s paper, “Strengthening America’s Transportation Infrastructure,” makes recommendations under the following headings:

- Strengthen Core Infrastructure
- Support Amtrak Funding
- Support Development of High-Speed Freight and Passenger Rail
- Strengthen Metropolitan Planning to Cut Down Traffic Congestion
- Strengthen Air Transportation in Underserved Areas
- Modernize Infrastructure on the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers
- Improve Transportation Access to Jobs
- Improve and Modernize Air Traffic Control
- Protect Transportation Infrastructure from Terrorism
- Bolster Airport Security
- Safeguard Mass Public Transportation

Campaign Speech, 5/18/08 (KGW-TV video, accessed through YouTube on 7/18/08):

Appearing in Portland, Oregon, before that state’s president primary, Senator Obama said the following:

“It’s time for our entire country to learn from what’s happening right here in Portland with mass transit and bicycle lanes and funding alternative means of transportation. That’s the kind of solution we need for America.”

Campaign Policy Proposal, 6/16/08:

In a speech at Flint, Michigan, entitled “Renewing American Competitiveness,” Senator Obama referenced his infrastructure proposal:

“A third part of our agenda must be a commitment to 21st century infrastructure. If we want to keep up with China or Europe, we can't settle for crumbling roads and bridges, aging water and sewer pipes, and faltering electrical grids that cost us billions to blackouts, repairs and travel delays. It's gotten so bad that the American Society of Civil Engineers gave our national infrastructure a ‘D.’ A century ago, Teddy Roosevelt called together leaders from business and government to develop a plan for 20th century infrastructure. It falls to us to do the same.

“As President, I will launch a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that will invest \$60 billion over ten years – a bank that can leverage private investment in infrastructure improvements, and create nearly two million new jobs. The work will be determined by what will maximize our safety and security and ability to compete. We will fund this bank as we bring the war in Iraq to a responsible close. It's time to stop spending billions of dollars a week on a blank check for an Iraqi government that won't spend its own oil revenues. It's time to strengthen transportation and to protect vulnerable targets from terrorism at home. We can modernize our power grid, which will help conservation and spur on the development and distribution of clean energy. We can invest in rail, so that cities like Detroit, Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Louis are connected by high-speed trains, and folks have alternatives to air travel. That's what we can do if we commit to rebuild a stronger America.”

Campaign Speech, 6/21/08:

Speaking to the U.S. Conference of Mayors in Miami, Florida, Senator Obama outlined his position on infrastructure investment:

“[W]e'll unlock the potential of all our regions by connecting them with a 21st century infrastructure. You know why this is so important. You see the traffic along I-95 in Miami. You see the crumbling roads and bridges, the aging water and sewer pipes, the faltering electrical grids that cost us billions in blackouts, repairs, and travel delays. It's gotten so bad that the American Society of Civil Engineers gave our national infrastructure a ‘D.’ And it's no wonder – because we're spending less on our infrastructure than at any time in the modern era.

“This is putting enormous pressure on the Highway Trust Fund, which can no longer keep up with all the repairs that have to be made. Yet Senator McCain is actually proposing a gas tax gimmick that would take \$3 billion a month out of the Highway Trust Fund and hand it over to the oil companies. Well, at a time when the Highway Trust Fund is beginning to run a deficit for the first time in history, I think that's the last thing we can afford to do...

“And just the other day, Senator McCain traveled to Iowa to express his sympathies for the victims of the recent flooding. I'm sure they appreciated the sentiment, but they probably would have appreciated it more if he hadn't voted against funding for levees and flood control programs, which he seems to consider pork. Well, we do have to reform budget earmarks, cut genuine pork, and dispense with unnecessary spending, as we confront a budget crisis left by the most fiscally irresponsible administration in modern times.

“But when it comes to rebuilding America's essential but crumbling infrastructure, we need to do more, not less. Cities across the Midwest are under water right now or courting disaster not just because of the weather, but because we've failed to protect them. Maintaining our levees and dams isn't pork barrel spending, it's an urgent priority, and that's what we'll do when I'm President. I'll also launch a National Infrastructure Reinvestment Bank that will invest \$60 billion over ten years, and create nearly two million new jobs. The work will be determined by what will maximize our safety, security, and shared prosperity. Instead of building bridges to nowhere, let's build communities that meet the needs and reflect the dreams of our families. That's what this bank will help us do.

“And we will fund this bank as we bring the war in Iraq to a responsible close...”

Republican Presidential Candidate
John McCain
U.S. Senator, Arizona (1987-present)
U.S. House of Representatives, Arizona (1983-87)

Senate floor statement, 5/12/05 (debating the federal highway/transit bill, later to be named SAFETEA-LU):

“Mr. MCCAIN: ...[W]hen people look back 50 years from now at the highway legislation that the Senate will consider shortly, I doubt that history will remember this Congress as having helped to improve on President Eisenhower’s ‘Grand Plan.’ We are no longer focused on building a unified transportation system to improve the safety, security, and economy of our Nation as a whole. Instead, we are faced with legislation that redistributes funding to the States in a fiscally irresponsible and grossly unfair manner...

“...In the 108th Congress we did not reauthorize these programs and, instead, Congress passed a series of short-term extensions of TEA-21. And this happened for good reason. The highway bill brought to the Senate floor in the last Congress would have increased overall funding to 318 billion dollars – 100 billion dollars over the TEA-21 enacted level.

"I commend the Chairman of the Environment and Public Works Committee for reducing the authorized number to match the President’s fiscal year 2006 budget proposal of 284 billion dollars in the version of the bill reported by his committee. The reduction in the overall size of the bill was a significant improvement over the legislation presented to the Senate last year. Fiscal discipline is a key component of this debate... We must control our spending. We simply must. And that is why the overall size of this bill must not be inflated.

“...[F]iscal prudence is crucial. But even if the conferees act sensibly and recognize the need for an agreement that would be acceptable to the President, that alone would not make this legislation adequate. Equity is also crucial, and – unfortunately – the highway bill that is before us still retains a grossly unfair feature of past bills. In some cases, it is even more unfair than last year’s legislation.

“...I fully recognize that during the years when the Federal government was building the Interstate system, a redistribution of funding between the States may have made sense. Clearly, it would have been very difficult for the State of Montana, for example, with fewer than a million people, to pay the full cost of building its share of the Interstate system. But... that era is over. Congress declared the construction of the Interstate system complete in 1991. Yet here we are, almost 15 years later, and donor States are still expected to agree to the redistribution of hundreds of millions – if not billions – of dollars to other States regardless of the already enormous transportation needs of donor States.”

Senate floor statement, 7/29/05 (debating final passage of SAFETEA-LU Conference Report):

“Mr. MCCAIN: ...This monstrosity of a conference report – which costs an astounding \$286.4 billion – is both terrifying in its fiscal consequences and disappointing for the lack of fiscal discipline it represents. What will it take... to make the case for fiscal sanity in Congress?”

ABC News Republican Debate, 8/05/07 (reacting to the Minneapolis bridge collapse):

“MCCAIN: We passed a \$50 billion transportation bill that had \$2 billion in pork barrel earmarked projects: \$233 million for a bridge to nowhere in Alaska, to an island with 50 people on it. Not one dime in those pork barrel projects was for inspection or repair of bridges... They were for pork barrel projects. I’ll veto every single bill that comes across my desk and make the authors of those pork barrel projects [famous]...”

Senate floor statement, 9/12/07 (debating FY2008 Transportation-HUD Appropriations Bill):

“Mr. MCCAIN: ...[F]unding for transportation infrastructure and transportation safety is of enormous importance and I know all of us support doing what we can to improve our nation’s transportation system, from our roads and bridges to our air service. The tragic bridge collapse in Minnesota in August was a harsh reminder of just how critical our responsibilities are to balance competing transportation funding needs. But we simply must do so in a fiscally responsible manner. The Senate’s action Monday to increase the obligation limitation for the highway trust fund by \$1 billion is not the answer nor was it responsible. It might have been politically expedient, but it is not the answer...”

“Instead of raising the gas taxes, as some members of Congress have suggested, for the millions of Americans who are already paying more for gas than ever before, the Federal and state governments must prioritize transportation spending to focus on projects with the most need rather than building ‘bridges to nowhere.’ If Congress fails to recover from its addiction to earmarks, then crumbling bridges, congested highways, and crowded airports will continue much to the detriment of all Americans.”

CNN-YouTube Debate, 11/28/07 (question on infrastructure):

“Question [to all the candidates]: It's been estimated that to fix the bridges, the tunnels, the power grids, the water delivery systems in this country will be in excess of \$2 trillion -- that is "t" for "trillion" -- and it is plural. Who among the candidates here is willing to step forward and begin to articulate the very difficult sacrifices which we need to make in order to start repairing America?...”

“SENATOR MCCAIN: First thing I'll do, my friends, is take out my veto pen and veto every single pork-barrel project that comes across my desk, and there will be no more bridges to nowhere under my administration, I promise you that. And we'll give the president of the United States the line-item veto... [W]e will take the money and give it back to the states and we'll let them make these decisions, but we'll never have another pork barrel project as long as I'm capable of wielding a veto pen.”

CNBC Interview with John Harwood, 4/15/08:

“I think high gas taxes are a regressive tax. Who drives the furthest? You spend a lot of time in Washington, D.C. The people who live closest to work are the wealthiest, who live in Georgetown. The people who drive the furthest are the lowest income Americans. It is incredibly regressive. Where’s the fairness? Where’s the fairness there? Americans... look... not only are they spending too much on their gas, but we, as a nation, we’re sending \$400 billion a year to countries that don’t like us very much, the money ends up in the hands of terrorist organizations, it does, and it’s a national security issue. Not to mention our need to adopt green technologies. So, again, Americans are not undertaxed whether it be at the gas pump, or whether it be when they fill out their tax return. That’s the difference between us. And in all due respect again, if someone thinks we ought to increase taxes on gas, they are laying a heavier burden on the lowest income Americans and I don’t think that is fair to America.”

Discussions with reporters, 4/30/08 and 5/1/08 (New York Times, 5/2/08)

In a meeting with reporters in Pennsylvania on April 30, Senator McCain discussed the issue of earmarks and his view of their relationship to the Minneapolis I-35W bridge collapse:

“The bridge in Minneapolis didn’t collapse because there wasn’t enough money. The bridge in Minneapolis collapsed because so much money was spent on wasteful, unnecessary pork-barrel projects.”

The next day Senator McCain revisited the issue in talking to reporters while traveling through Iowa:

“When you divert money to projects that are unneeded and unwanted, any project that is deserved is not going to receive the funding that’s necessary. And I will maintain again that I believe that when you fund a bridge to Alaska or you fund a highway in Florida that the people there don’t even want, then money is diverted from much-needed projects.”

Congressional Votes

Both presumptive major party nominees have served in the U.S. Senate and, as such, have had opportunities to vote on authorization and appropriations (spending) bills relating to transportation infrastructure. The following are some key votes since 1998. Senator McCain has served in the Senate during this entire period, while Senator Obama has done so since 2005.

Efforts to cut the federal motor fuels tax, 1998:

- 3/11/98 – A vote on a motion to waive the Congressional Budget Act and allow an amendment proposed by Senator Connie Mack (R-FL) that would have repealed 4.3 cents per gallon of the federal motor fuels tax that had been transferred to the Highway Trust Fund by the Taxpayer Relief Act of 1997. A “yes” vote would have allowed for consideration of the Mack Amendment to cut the federal gas tax by 4.3 cents. **Motion Failed 18-80 – Senator McCain voted YES.**

Enactment of TEA-21, the federal highway/transit bill, 1998:

- 5/22/98 – A vote to accept the conference report on the highway/transit bill later named the “Transportation Equity Act for the 21st Century” (TEA-21). The bill authorized federal investment levels of \$175 billion for highways and \$41.4 billion for transit over six years. **Conference Report Passed 88-5 – Senator McCain did not vote.**

Enactment of AIR-21, the federal aviation reauthorization bill, 2000:

- 3/8/00 – The House version of this bill included provisions more than doubling the annual federal investment level for airport construction provided by the Airport Improvement Program (AIP) and taking the federal Airport and Airway Trust Fund off-budget. The Senate version of this bill, sponsored by Senator McCain in his role as chairman of the Senate Commerce Committee, would have maintained essentially status quo levels of airport construction investment and program structure. The “conference report” negotiated by representatives of each chamber included record investment increases for both the AIP and the Airport and Airway Trust Fund. **Conference Report Passed 82-17 – Senator McCain did not vote.**

Efforts to cut or suspend the federal motor fuels tax, 2000:

- 4/6/00 – A non-binding amendment offered by Senator Robert C. Byrd (D-WV) expressing the “sense of the Senate” supporting the continued use of federal fuel taxes for the construction and rehabilitation of our nation's highways, bridges, and transit systems. **Amendment passed 65-35 – Senator McCain voted NO.**
- 4/11/00 – A vote on a motion by Senator Trent Lott (R-MS) to “invoke cloture” and move forward with a bill instituting a federal fuels tax holiday (i.e. suspending a portion of the federal gas tax). **Failed 43-56 – Senator McCain voted YES.**
- 7/13/00 – A vote on an amendment that would temporarily reduce the federal fuels tax to zero. **Amendment failed 40-59 – Senator McCain voted YES.**

Reauthorization of TEA-21, the federal highway/transit reauthorization bill (later named SAFETEA-LU), 2004-05:

- 2/12/04 – Amendment offered by Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) to reduce the overall six-year authorization level from \$318 billion to the President's requested level of \$256 billion. **Amendment failed 20-78 – Senator McCain voted YES.**
- 5/11/05 – Senate Budget Committee Chairman Judd Gregg (R-NH) raised a “budget point of order” that the highway/transit bill would violate the federal Budget Act if it exceeded \$283.9 billion. Senator James Inhofe (R-OK) asked senators to vote on waiving relevant provisions of the Budget Act so the Senate could consider a highway/transit bill with a six-year authorization level of \$295.4 billion. A “no” vote against waiving the “budget point of order” would have prevented consideration of a bill at the higher investment level. **The point of order was waived by a vote of 76-22 – Senator Obama voted YES. Senator McCain voted NO.**
- 5/17/05 – Amendment offered by Senator Jeff Sessions (R-AL) to cut the overall six-year authorization level in the highway/transit bill by \$10.7 billion. **Amendment failed 16-84 – Senator Obama voted NO. Senator McCain voted YES.**

Federal Gas Tax Holiday

In April and May 2008, Senators McCain and Obama – along with Senator Hillary Clinton (D - New York) prior to her withdrawal – devoted significant time and resources to public discussion of a proposed federal gas tax holiday. In general, Senator McCain and Senator Clinton supported the concept while Senator Obama opposed it. Each candidate made numerous public references to the issue in speeches, debates, interviews and campaign commercials. This section of the report includes a sampling from Senators McCain and Obama on this issue. It should be noted that ARTBA has strongly opposed all gas tax suspension proposals and has disseminated memoranda and news releases to Capitol Hill and the media detailing the negative effects any suspension would have on federal transportation investment and policy, regardless of whether or how the federal Highway Trust Fund would be reimbursed for lost revenue from other sources.

Senator McCain, Campaign Policy Proposal, 4/15/08:

In a speech at Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Senator McCain described his economic stimulus plan, which included a proposal to suspend the federal motor fuels tax:

“There are larger problems underlying the price of oil, all of which I will address in my energy plan, but in the short term there are crucial measures we can take... I propose that the federal government suspend all taxes on gasoline now paid by the American people - from Memorial Day to Labor Day of this year. The effect will be an immediate economic stimulus - taking a few dollars off the price of a tank of gas every time a family, a farmer, or trucker stops to fill up. Over the same period, our government should suspend the purchase of oil for the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, which has also contributed to the rising price of oil. This measure, combined with the summer-long ‘gas-tax holiday,’ will bring a timely reduction in the price of gasoline. And because the cost of gas affects the price of food, packaging, and just about everything else, these immediate steps will help to spread relief across the American economy.”

After ARTBA and other groups pointed out that a summer gas tax suspension would cost the federal Highway Trust Fund as much as \$9 billion, McCain campaign spokesman Brian Rogers responded, "Senator McCain believes that general revenue transfers should be made to offset the impact on the transportation fund." (*Mark Murray, MSNBC "First Read" blog, 4/15/08*)

Senator Obama, Campaign Speech, 4/29/08 (from www.barackobama.com):

In a speech at Indianapolis, Indiana, entitled "Plan to Fight for Working Families and Take on Special Interests in Washington," Senator Obama expressed his opposition to a gas tax holiday:

"Some of you might have seen that Senator Clinton's spending a lot of money on a television ad that attacks me for not supporting her and John McCain's idea of a gas tax holiday for the summer. Now, this is an idea that will save you - altogether - half a tank of gas. That's thirty cents a day. For three months. That's if the oil companies don't simply jack up their price to fill the gap, as they've done when this was tried before. Does anyone here really trust the oil companies to give you the savings when they could just pocket the money themselves? It's a shell game. Literally. In a moment of candor, her advisors actually admitted that it wouldn't have much of an effect on gas prices. But, they said, it's a great political issue for Senator Clinton. So this is not about getting you through the summer, it's about getting elected. And this is what passes for leadership in Washington-- phony ideas, calculated to win elections instead of actually solving problems. Now Senator Clinton's been using this issue to make the argument that I'm somehow 'out of touch.' Well let me tell you - only in Washington can you get away with calling someone out of touch when you're the one who thinks that thirty cents a day is enough to help people who are struggling in this economy. I'll tell you what I think - I think the American people are smarter than Washington gives us credit for."

Senator McCain, Iowa town hall meeting, 5/1/08 (asked about reaction to his gas tax holiday proposal) (New York Times, 5/2/08):

"You'd think that I was attacking Western civilization as we know it. The special interests, 'Oh, my God. This will destroy our transportation system in America. This will have disastrous consequences.' Look, all I think is we ought to give low-income Americans, in particular, a little relief."