

## U.S. House Committee Moves Surface Transportation Bill

The Motorcycle Riders Foundation (MRF) has learned that, with little pomp and even less circumstance, the United States House of Representatives subcommittee on Highways and Transit voice voted the Surface Transportation Bill on to the full House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee (HTIC). The 800-page bill lays out a plan for revamping the nation's highway systems and safety programs not seen in the last few decades. The spending bill, which is yet to receive a number or name – and even more importantly a price tag –, is mammoth.

The Highway Trust Fund (HTF) will be out of money 6 weeks before the fund was supposed to be tapped out. Future predictions for the HTF, which is funded through a national gas tax, are bleak. With more fuel-efficient cars and record-breaking gas prices, Americans have done the unthinkable the past few years – buy less gas. That conundrum will leave the HTF with about \$250 billion to be generated over the next 6 years. Congressman Jim Oberstar, Chairman of the HTIC, wants to spend \$500 billion. Talks between the House, Senate and White House have completely broken down. Oberstar would like to raise the gas tax, and both the Senate and the White House shot that down immediately. This stalemate will likely delay the bill significantly; some say well into 2012. At the same time, it could move quickly, but that's not likely.

The bill does have some motorcycle-specific provisions, the lion's share of which is very positive. The MRF has been meeting with the committee staff writing the bill for the past few years to ensure that motorcyclists benefit from the legislation. For the first time, the highway safety funds obligate a percentage that can only be used for motorcycle safety programs. Depending on the percentage (all financial details at this point are to be determined), the motorcycle safety community could see a huge infusion of federal cash.

There is one provision that the MRF will be aggressively working to remove. In one section of the bill, some rules are laid out for Public Private Partnerships (PPP). PPPs are stretches of toll road that a community leases to a private sector partner. The partner pays the leasing government up front and in turn gets to keep all the tolls for the length of the lease. The city of Chicago leased a toll road for 99 years to a private company for \$1.8 billion in 2005. The provision of concern gives the private sector partner the power to request from the Secretary of Transportation a ban on motorcycles from the road. The private partner must certify that the presence of motorcycles is causing a safety hazard. The Secretary must approve the request. Current law allows for the same situation, but gives the requesting power to the state agency, not a private for-profit corporation.

Public Private Partnerships have fallen out of favor with many municipalities and individuals, but this section is still of grave concern. It's troubling to think that roads built with federal tax dollars could exclude motorcycles. Precedent has been set in our favor in the past; convincing Congress will be our task.

The MRF will keep you informed on the movement of the bill and of the motorcycle-specific provisions in the bill.