

Pork With a Point

The highway bill—a translation

BY P. J. O'ROURKE

President Bush has proposed a whopping \$256 billion six-year transportation bill. The House passed a \$275 billion appropriation with only sixty-five "nay" votes. The Senate, by a three-to-one ratio, approved its own \$318 billion version. There'd be money for roads, rails, bus stops, bike boulevards, jogging esplanades, Segway cloverleaf interchanges, unicycle-only express lanes, whatever. For once the government would accomplish something concrete, as it were. Everyone loved the bill, which was known as the Safe, Accountable, Flexible, and Efficient Transportation Equity Act, or SAFETEA. (What fun just naming it.) And yet SAFETEA couldn't muster enough speed to get past the House-Senate legislative conference, and ended up stalled behind the threat of a presidential veto, because everybody also hated it.

Well-informed opinion-makers, which is to say *The New York Times*, published an article about the bill: "BUILT WITH STEEL, PERHAPS, BUT GREASED WITH PORK." It seems that the House Transportation and Infrastructure chairman, Don Young (R., Alaska), would get his state \$200 million for a mile-long bridge linking Ketchikan (pop. 7,845) with its airport (six flights a day). A five-minute ferry ride would be avoided.

The conservative Heritage Foundation objected to the diversion of funds from superhighways to social byways. Public transit, Heritage says, serves only two percent of the public. And a plurality of those straphangers are—to be blunt—from the New York area. But one out of five SAFETEA dollars would go to public transit.

The nature-loving Sierra Club protested that four out of five SAFETEA dollars would go to roads, many of them running right through nature.

States with a lot of nature and hence a lot of driving took issue with SAFETEA's distribution of federal-fuel-tax proceeds. Texas would get back less than it paid in taxes; Connecticut would get back more. The states have an idea: Give each state slightly more than the others.

Congress is mad because SAFETEA is too small. Don Young originally wanted a \$375 billion bill. And President Bush is mad because SAFETEA is too big. He says he'll refuse to sign anything over \$256 billion, which is still \$32 billion more than the fuel tax is expected to provide to the supposedly self-financing Highway Trust Fund. (The President is suddenly worried about deficits.)

Everybody is—as complex legislation usually makes people—wrong.

Local-project funding for influential legislators, or "pork," is only about four percent of the transportation bill. And not all pork is as pointless as the Ketchikan bridge. Bringing nothing home to constituents is death to politicians. We don't want government by suicide.

Pork is the price of deciding transportation issues politically. And transportation issues are so politicized—think new turnpike through your patio—that only politics will do. It may sound like free-market sense when the Heritage Foundation says that light rail costs four times as much as automobiles per passenger-mile. But voters like trains. In a recent AP poll 51 percent of respondents favored giving priority to government spending on public transit (although almost 90 percent said they drove to work).

I talked to a lobbyist for highway builders. "Any project," he said, "needs political offsets—ten percent to twenty percent to environmentalists." He called it "green pork."

Those who order the green pork should offer some political offsets of their own. Don't be too anti-car and anti-truck in a country where 90 percent of travel is by car, 64 percent of freight is trucked, and roads occupy only half of one percent of the land area.

Even a political journalist must confess that politics has a good driving record. When the federal government completed its first national road survey, in 1904, just 141 miles of pavement existed outside cities. Today there are 3.9 million miles of it, almost all politically funded.

But not funded well enough. Since 1982 the U.S. population has grown by 24 percent. Vehicle-miles traveled per year have increased by 75 percent, while road capacity has become only six percent greater. According to the Department of Transportation, traffic congestion now affects a third of all travel on major

roads. Meanwhile, the federal fuel tax—18.4 cents a gallon—hasn't been raised since 1993.

The situation is bad enough that actual taxpayers are willing to pay more taxes. In a 2003 Zogby poll 67 percent of likely voters (Bush voters presumably included) said they'd pay a little more gas tax if the money went to transportation. Don Young, a big spender who should know, thinks a nickel-a-gallon tax increase would do it.

Even if we build garden paths to lead the innocent down instead of roads, we need money. The DOT says that 18 percent of federal high-

ways are in "poor" or "mediocre" condition, and that 29 percent of U.S. bridges are "structurally deficient" or "functionally obsolete." (I don't know what these classifications mean, and don't want to find out while crossing the Golden Gate.) The DOT estimates that \$71.9 billion a year (meaning a \$431.4 billion six-year transportation bill) is required to "begin making significant improvement to the system."

SAFETEA is a bad bill. We need a worse one.

P. J. O'Rourke is a correspondent for The Atlantic. His most recent book is Peace Kills.