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Trump Orders Rapid Review for High-Priority Infrastructure.

DALLAS - President Donald Trump's executive order to streamline the environmental permitting process for high-priority infrastructure projects will allow roads and bridges to be built more quickly, according to Rep. Bill Shuster, R-Pa., chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Trump signed an executive order this week that requires the chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality to coordinate "expedited procedures and deadlines for completion of environmental reviews and approvals" for infrastructure projects designated as a high priority by a governor or the head of a federal department or agency.

"Too often, infrastructure projects in the United States have been routinely and excessively delayed by agency processes and procedures," the order said. "These delays have increased project costs and blocked the American people from the full benefits of increased infrastructure investments."

Shorter delays with a more rapid environmental permit review would result in road and bridge projects being operational years earlier than now and at a lower cost, Shuster said during an interview Wednesday on Fox Business News.

"This is what we need to do with these reforms in Congress," Shuster said. "We need to make sure these projects move faster because time is money."

Once the request for high-priority status is received, the council's staff has 30 days to decide whether the project qualifies for an expedited approval process. If the deadline is missed, the head of the agency must provide a written explanation for the delay to the council chair.

A certified project would go to the top of the priority list of the federal agencies required by law to review and approve it.

Trump said the executive order will help streamline a "cumbersome, long, horrible permitting process" that has held up some infrastructure projects for years.

"We can't be in an environmental process for 15 years if a bridge is going to be falling down or a highway is crumbling," he said during the signing ceremony in the Oval Office.

"If it's a no, we'll give them a quick no, and if it's a yes, it's like 'Let's start building,'" Trump said. "The regulatory process in this country has become a tangledup mess, and very unfair to people."

The order shows that Trump sees infrastructure as an important function of government and that the review process is often too cumbersome, said Nick Goldstein, vice president of regulatory affairs at the American Road and Transportation Builders Association.

"It's certainly a good thing, although we don't know yet who is going to head the environmental council," Goldstein said. "One of our priorities always has been a more rational environmental review process."

Trump's executive order is an endorsement of the regulatory reforms that construction contractors have been seeking for years, said Brian Turmail, senior executive director of public affairs at the Associated General Contractors of America.

"Despite significant reforms we have helped get enacted in recent surface transportation measures that have cut some time from the federal review process, it still takes too long to get a final decision out of the federal government," Turmail said.

"These delays needlessly inflate the cost of many infrastructure projects and undermine public confidence in the federal government's ability to get the job done," he said.

It's too early to tell how the order will affect project delivery, said Lloyd Brown, director of communications at the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials.

"We're going to work with federal and state officials to make sure we understand the process and get projects delivered as quickly as possible," Brown said. "AASHTO supports regulatory streamlining but we also take very seriously our environmental responsibilities."

The Bond Buyer

By Jim Watts

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